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Attics, Art Houses, and Backyards:
Indie Film Exhibition and Local Film Communities in Austin, Texas

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Attics, Art Houses, and Backyards:
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, who have shown constant support for me and my work, even when it might seem like I just watch movies all the time and not much else.

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Abstract

Attics, Art Houses, and Backyards:
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Since their rise in America in the mid-20th century, independent movie theaters have served as important sites of alternative film exhibition in an industry so often dominated by a select group of entities. As objects of study, however, they have largely stood as venues that present upscale experiences and films for similarly positioned audiences, an attitude that has in many ways remained to the present day. Scholars such as Barbara Wilinsky and Douglas Gomery, particularly, have noted the ways in which art house theaters have perpetuated notions of high class culture compared to mainstream movie palaces and megaplexes. In the present moment, art houses have largely shifted to presenting themselves as integral parts of their cities' film communities. This thesis seeks to take up independent film exhibitors in Austin, Texas, namely Austin Film Society and Hyperreal Film Club, an art house theater and microcinema, respectively, as case studies in order to ask how these different kinds of venues define and create local filmgoing communities in different ways. For AFS in particular, this thesis looks at their role both

presently and historically, as they have been the most influential force in shaping Austin's film community since the 1980s. In the case of Hyperreal Film Club, I aim to show how they bring a different attitude towards exhibition that seeks to move beyond models of engagement established by art houses more generally. This is all done by examining internal and public documents from these groups, programming schedules and general programming, and interviews with various individuals involved with each of these groups with the hope of better understanding not only the priorities of these kinds of exhibitors in regard to these communities, but how this affects who is or is not envisioned within them. In doing so, this thesis brings to light not only the ways in which dominant indie institutions, in some ways, perpetuate historic industrial trends of appealing to affluent audiences and how new players are attempting to address such trends, but also how these different groups envision their roles in their respective local communities in a post-COVID-19 entertainment landscape.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

When I was growing up in the suburbs of Seattle, going to see a movie in a theater was a somewhat regular activity for my family and not one that was seen as particularly special. This isn't an uncommon experience for many Americans, as filmgoing has increasingly become one of the standard ways to kill a few hours and (hopefully) enjoy a film, which was largely my own understanding of how I was meant to go to the movies. However, in 2014, I attended my first screenings of films at the Seattle International Film Festival, during which I saw pretty typical festival fare of foreign and indie films of varying levels of stature and acclaim. What stood out to me was how these screenings weren't normal moviegoing experiences. Rather, audience members were participating in an event, taking part in a more communal experience specific to SIFF that they couldn't get anywhere else, whether it be a typical theater or another film festival. My curiosity about filmgoing and exhibition as a communal experience was sparked at that festival.

Since then, I've worked as a projectionist for the Pickford Film Center in Bellingham, Washington, and visited several other art house theaters across the United States, which have helped me further develop my understanding of the ways in which film exhibition can be framed as a community tool on top of a communal experience. As a projectionist, I learned how films are programmed, how different events are run, and how these things are inherently tied to places in which they take place. From events at the Pickford Film Center to screenings of Stan Brakhage and Peggy Ahwesh films at Anthology Film Archives in New York City, it has become clear that theaters such as

these tend to reflect the desires and interests of the people from those areas who attend those programs.

Most recently, upon moving to Austin, Texas for graduate school, I've felt lucky to briefly be immersed in a city with a strong and historic film culture. One of its most prominent film institutions, the Austin Film Society Cinema, was a particular place of interest for me as a moviegoer. Its position within Austin's film culture and history was something I became more interested in as I became more familiar with it, especially in relation to the other moviegoing options that the city has to offer. AFS Cinema was more in line with what I knew as an art house theater, both because of its own specific charm, but also how it seemed to fit into a more general idea that I had formed of what a theater such as that can and should be: a place for people, self-identified as cinephiles or not, to see films that they likely wouldn't get to see anywhere else.

In the larger context of the United States film industry, Austin has served as a historical hotspot for independent film, both in the realm of production and as a topic of academic research for scholars like Alison Macor, Donna de Ville, and Rob Stone. Though its status as a film production hub can be traced back to films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974, dir. Tobe Hooper), Austin was more noticeably put on the moviemaking map in the 1980s and early 1990s due to the work of Richard Linklater, both in terms of his own filmmaking (e.g., *Slacker* [1991], *Dazed and Confused* [1993]), and his involvement in the city's film community at large (Patoski 180).

Before the success of his films, Linklater founded the Austin Film Society (or AFS) in 1985 as a way to educate himself on film history, and also as a means to

cultivate a filmgoing community in his adopted home city at a time when film viewing resources were slowly disappearing ("Our Story," Patoski 183). In that time, the films screened would range from experimental blocks of Kenneth Anger and Maya Deren shorts to retrospectives of directors like Rainer Werner Fassbinder, films that would have been next to impossible to see on one's own at the time because of the lack of such programming from mainstream theaters or the university. While this was surely as much a way for Linklater to see some of these more obscure films from known directors in order to feed his own cinephilia, he would soon find that there was enough of an audience within Austin to sustain and justify the exhibition of such films.

These early AFS screenings were relatively small, but had a loyal following because of their underground, or DIY, mode of function, which Linklater likened to that of a punk show in terms of the small, communal aspect of it, as well as in that their advertising strategies were essentially that of local punk bands (Patoski 188). For the most part, Linklater charged enough to break even on film rentals and used spaces that he could use through various connections, usually by friends, local businesses, or in conjunction with other institutions like museums (Patoski 182). While by no means a large-scale operation, these screenings served as the beginnings of what would become the center of local film exhibition and production in Austin.

Even as AFS took on a more official mode of organization and operation, most importantly becoming a nonprofit in the late 1980s, and began to play a role in fostering and funding local production, their screenings remained transient and reliant on other Austin institutions to host them (Patoski 183). AFS would go on to show films on the

campus of Austin Community College or at various Alamo Drafthouse locations before finally acquiring their own, permanent screening space north of the city center in 2016 (Whittaker). To this day, their two screens at The Linc Shopping Center serve as their main point of contact with Austin's filmgoing public, putting on events and screenings in partnership with various Austin organizations such as Cine Las Americas, Austin Asian American Film Festival, and Cinema Touching Disability, among many others, seeing over 70,000 patrons in a year (Austin Film Society "2019 Annual Report").

Thirty-five years later, Austin's film culture has developed into an integral part of the city's identity, and sites like AFS have evolved far beyond their largely DIY roots and have even become cornerstones of the city's national reputation. In the case of AFS, it transitioned from a transient, relatively scrappy, yet successful series of foreign, experimental, and independent cinema for Austin audiences to a much larger organization with duties reaching far beyond their cinema. For example, AFS currently hosts the Texas Film Awards, provides filmmaker support programs ranging from grants to workshops of various kinds, maintains youth education programs, and operates the production spaces of Austin Studios and Austin Public for film and television production, respectively. So, while AFS Cinema is but one branch of the larger organization of AFS, it is absolutely the branch that the majority of the public is most aware of and engages with regularly, and as such it has the biggest, or at least most broad, impact on the identity of Austin's film community in a more general sense.

It is important to acknowledge that AFS's reach within the Austin film community extends far beyond the common practice of moviegoing. Currently, they are

actively involved in production, education, as well as exhibition, to name a few things, but this thesis intends to focus only on the study of exhibition. While all of these areas are in some ways interconnected, being able to cover them all would extend beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis, and by focusing on exhibition I hope to create a better understanding of the specific branch of AFS that the public is most familiar with, and thus is the point at which "community" is more easily formed or expressed on a larger scale than with production communities.

Art house theaters such as AFS Cinema have become standard attractions across most major American cities today, from larger, more metropolitan ones such as Seattle's Northwest Film Forum and New York City's Anthology Film Archives to smaller ones like Tucson, Arizona's Loft Cinema. Such venues typically operate on a model and/or mission of providing a space for film exhibition that serves as a way to bring people together for the sake of celebrating cinema, and to foster a filmgoing community in their respective cities. The existence, role, and purpose of theaters, both art houses and multiplexes, throughout the United States' history is a topic that scholars have explored in a variety of ways, and has only become more popular for film researchers as the market for independent, foreign, and art house film has grown over the last few decades. Within this area of study, Austin has certainly been seen as a rich object of study because of its status within the industry. However, as the city has undergone major changes in size, industry presence, and community demographics since the days of *Slacker* (1991), Austin's film community as well as the practices and goals of AFS Cinema have changed in a way that hasn't been fully reflected in such scholarship.

As such, this thesis has two main goals: First, to address the growth and changes of AFS as it transitioned from a DIY exhibition project to a more recognizable art house institution as Austin has exponentially grown into a major American city. Second is to examine where AFS Cinema, as an example of house theaters more generally, sits within the larger framework of film exhibition spaces as "alternative" spaces. Primarily, I will compare AFS Cinema to a contemporary microcinema, Hyperreal Film Club, a relatively new exhibition group in Austin's film scene. This comparative approach will allow me to show how each group fulfils its respective community-oriented goals while using drastically different models of exhibition, programming, and community involvement.

In order to explore the contemporary status of Austin as a local exhibition site, the main research questions that guide this study are "How do different local Austin film exhibition venues communicate and cultivate different conceptions of a film community?" and "In what ways do these venues' exhibition practices reflect these ideals?" Other sub-questions that I address include "How has the city of Austin's growth affected the ways in which organizations like AFS approach their work and how they envision their film community?" and "Might these changes be indicative of more general trends for art houses across the United States?" The thesis hopes to examine how Austin, a city well-known for its cool and "authentic" DIY film culture, develops and becomes a more high-profile cultural destination, and what this development does to the city's established and emergent film groups. I will consider the extent to which AFS Cinema's efforts to adapt to their larger status and function in the local and national film scene might in turn cause them to move toward exhibition practices that generally align with

national release (new and repertory) schedules instead of programming that reflects a more individualistic, unique, and local preference that feels more "authentically Austin."

To address these questions, this thesis will trace both the evolution and current status of AFS in comparison to the more recent development of Hyperreal Film Club. These two case studies will be used both to contextualize the industrial and social positioning of AFS throughout its history as both a scrappy DIY theater and a more formal art house theater, and to reassess the current status of Austin as an American independent film production and exhibition center. Though these are certainly not the only two options available in the city for seeing films, I think that they illustrate two key positions of independent art house film exhibition and as such will be most useful for talking about these issues. Other Austin exhibitors such as Alamo Drafthouse, though arguably just as notable and important for the city's filmgoing reputation and community with events such as Fantastic Fest, occupy a middle-ground between independent theater and national chain that doesn't quite fit into the scope of this thesis. While I think that addressing Alamo more within the thesis would bring up some interesting perspectives in regard to creating and cultivating a specific kind of viewing identity for its audiences, it would likely increase the thesis to a size too large for its intended length and scope.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Austin's identity as an emergent, hip destination for film production and exhibition largely saw its inception in the 1960s and 70s with the works of filmmakers such as Tobe Hooper (*Eggshells* [1969], *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* [1974]) and

Eagle Pennell (*The Whole Shootin' Match* [1978]) that came alongside an influx of younger Americans to the city (Macor 11). Largely, this was the beginning of Austin's reputation as an up-and-coming place for independent film production, among other indie and alternative cultures that set the stage for the culture that arose in the 80s and 90s such as its music scene. Scholars such as Alison Macor and Joe Patoski have largely covered Austin's cultural developments and happenings from the mid-20th century to the present, respectively writing on the development of Austin's filmmaking scene since the 1970s and the growth of AFS from its inception to a combination production/exhibition institution. Macor traces the beginnings of Austin's notable regional filmmaking to the late 70s and sees that as the launching point for future filmmaking in the area. Both Macor's and Patoski's work specifically emphasizes how, in the 1980s and 1990s, a new spirit and attitude arose in the city with Linklater's involvement in Austin's film scene as both an exhibitor and later a producer/director that stood pretty firmly against, or at least as a stark alternative to, the established institutions (mainstream theaters, on-campus screenings, for example) that were already present in both the city and country as a whole (Patoski 184).

Since these early days of AFS and Linklater's career, Austin's film scene has been, and continues to be, a cornerstone of American indie culture in a city known for both its music and film. In this context, Michael Z. Newman, Sherry B. Ortner, and Geoff King understand "indie" as a term typically deployed to suggest that a work, be it a film, piece of music, or work of literature, is a more "authentic" or autonomous alternative to its respective mainstream counterpart (Newman, *Indie* 3). "Indie" is also understood as an

American cultural movement going back as far as the 1950s and 60s as an attempt to stand against, though still firmly within, a mainstream context of art, ideology, and behavior. The term also typically indicates the ways in which people or media are (or are not) tied to various institutions (major music labels, film studios, governments, and so on) as an indication of its degree of authenticity. This label or identifier certainly carries over to the ways in which people think of institutions that present cultural objects themselves, including movie theaters. Linklater's creation of the Austin Film Society can be seen as an attempt to create and sustain a minority film culture within Austin by presenting more experimental films and series that local institutions, from the downtown Paramount theater to the screenings offered by The University of Texas at Austin's (UT Austin hereafter) Radio-Television-Film (RTF) program, wouldn't have offered (Patoski 182). Tied to his own tastes and interests as opposed to any outside influence, AFS at that point in time could certainly be understood as a pretty authentically indie endeavor.

Such a cultural position/opposition to mainstream and institutional film presentation is certainly common within certain exhibition practices characteristic of American art house theaters throughout their varied states of existence in the United States, though perhaps to different degrees or to different ends. Douglas Gomery and Barbara Willinsky have both traced a good portion of this history, noting the appearance of more specialized theaters (little theaters, ethnic theaters, and the like) in the early 20th century. Early programming at such theaters would be extremely specific, with programming at single theaters ranging from cartoons, to newsreels, and even translated titles or dubbed foreign films found in ethnic neighborhoods in larger cities such as New

York City or Chicago. Eventually, these would be the kinds of theaters, should they survive in the industry alongside the major Hollywood distributors/exhibitors, that would in some places transition into what is known as the art house theater in post-World War II America. They would be the places that brought films from soon-to-become canonical directors like Kurosawa, Bergman, and Fellini to American screens, though these would not necessarily be seen by typical moviegoers who would frequent movie palaces.

Non-mainstream film exhibition venues such as little theaters, ethnic theaters, or more upscale independent theaters sought to offer audiences an entirely new filmgoing experience and, in the case of upscale art theaters, attract those who felt alienated by Hollywood's appeal to the middle class (Wilinsky 49-50). This could involve programming for specific demographics, as was the case for ethnic theaters that would screen films from certain countries in their native tongue for local immigrant populations, but this historically has been as much matter of taste/class distinction and creating a space for affluent (economically or culturally) individuals to see film (Willinsky 56). With this in mind, the experience of going to the movies, even to this day, seems to be inherently tied to the people who are meant to be filling the seats, which is then imagined and determined by those that are running the theater. Gomery notes that in the case of art houses during their golden age (1950s-1960s), such a clientele would have an above-average education, mostly male, and college-educated, generally similar to the audiences of operas, theaters, lectures, and ballets, in "enclaves of the rich and educated" (189, 181).

The experience of going to art houses in many ways mirrored that of other cultural venues, with theater ushers that strictly enforced silent and "serious" viewing, shows with premium ticket prices, concessions that featured coffee and cakes over popcorn, and lobbies that encouraged mingling and congregation in a space with modern decor (Gomery 186). They were largely interested in foreign films from notable filmmakers like Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and Roberto Rossellini, who were rising to popularity among these crowds, as they were seen as more than pure entertainment, offering elevated, perhaps intellectual, experiences that mainstream American films failed to offer. Art houses largely continued to operate in this way, pretty successfully, until the 1980s, in which the general rise of conservatism, as well as the popularization of VHS and other methods of home viewing, led theaters to either close up entirely or move toward a non-profit model of business, becoming "part of the museum and educational establishment" (Gomery 194).

To this day, independent theaters largely operate under this non-profit model established in the 80s, continuing to offer screenings of current indie releases (which may sometimes be shared with larger theaters) as well as various repertory titles as a way to remain distinguished from their corporate competitors like Cinemark and AMC (Newman, *Indie* 75). Though this mode of operation has worked for a good number of theaters, scholars like Jeff Berg are careful to note that art houses are still very much precarious institutions, oftentimes finding it hard to make an impression in their local communities beyond the cinephilic crowds. Because of this, independent theaters often program with precarity in mind, and have continued to cater to their community's

upscale, educated, and affluent clientele in search of an elevated, differentiated, cinematic experience. This tends to be an effort for fundraising, as these audiences also tend to show up with more money to spend, and perhaps donate if asked to do so (Willinsky 84, 94). As a result, the identity of art house institutions become closely intertwined with the identity of its clientele, and when that clientele becomes more and more "distinguished," one might start to wonder how they figure into this framework of alternative or oppositional forces within the film industry.

And while art houses are in fact still an alternative to mainstream multiplexes, the emergence of microcinemas around the early 1990s has proven to make that distinction a bit more complicated. According to scholars like Donna de Ville, in forgoing traditional stadium-seating venues for more temporary, transient, or unofficial locations such as coffee shops, parking lots, community centers, and so forth, microcinemas are alternative film groups that offer more specific and/or specialized programming and experiences, and are oftentimes created with the explicit intent of being a direct alternative to traditional filmgoing experiences, including those provided by art houses. Rebecca Alvin specifically claims that art houses attract a kind of audience that is "less interested in the art of film and more interested in the trendiness of art cinema," whereas microcinemas (though not all looking to achieve the same goals) tend to cultivate audiences in search of a new kind of cinematic experience, one that shows films that would never be seen in other venues, including films made by community members or films that are neither seen as profitable for multiplexes or respectable enough for art houses (4, 5). As such, microcinemas aim to create social events with truly alternative films at their center as a

way to explicitly build a community of viewers with more specific and personal tastes (Alvin 6). Structurally, they tend to operate with low overhead and (sometimes) no stable venue, which helps to reject the hegemonic structures of viewer-exhibitor relations and consumption while fostering a space for a love of film (de Ville 105, Alvin 5). The following is a chart that breaks down some of the main differences between art houses and microcinemas, with traditional multi/megaplex theaters included as well:

Multi/Megaplexes	Art House Theaters	Microcinemas
- Consistent screening venue, usually with 15 screens or more - Admission charged - Stadium-style seating, with the recent standardization of larger, reclining seats - Screen either major blockbusters, major indies (especially if nominated for	- Consistent screening venue, usually with roughly 2-3 screens - Admission charged, donations encouraged - Typically stadium-style seating, may have seats on a single level depending on the venue type/size - Films shown typically fit into a "art house"	- Venue may change depending on space availability or audience size - Free or discount screenings with donations encouraged, - Location-dependent seating, can range from fold-up chairs to beach towels or couches in someone's backyard

Table 1.1 Theater Types and Amenities

any Oscars), rarely screen older/repertory films - Pre-show advertisements for large companies, upcoming films and television shows, behind-the-scenes/interviews for major films	type (current indie or foreign releases, festival winners, works from established auteurs) - Occasional film introductions from theater employees (often programmers), occasional Q&A's with filmmakers - Hosts fundraisers or galas	- Some typical art house fare, but also more frequently screen work from local filmmakers, and experimental/art films - Typically has an introduction from organizers or filmmakers, discussions with filmmakers if present, and discussion among audience is encouraged after screenings is encouraged

Table 1.1, cont. Theater Types and Amenities

As a result of their set goals and objectives, microcinemas change the status of the art house in such a way that positions art houses closer to dominant filmgoing culture instead of the more alternative culture that some might see them as being aligned with. This can certainly be attributed to the ways in which art houses must function with their programming choices and how they less often choose "risky" programs to avoid a financial risk, something microcinemas simply don't have to worry about, leading to a more anti-commercial attitude toward exhibition (Alvin 4). And while microcinemas tend to have a shorter life-span than other kinds of theaters (whether it's because of lack of

space, lack of funds, or decreased audiences), new ones are always appearing, and some have become mainstays in their communities. Examples would include Other Cinema in San Francisco, California, 911 Media Arts Center in Seattle, Washington, or the Aurora Picture Show in Houston, Texas (de Ville 106). Microcinemas are seen by those involved as more of a practice, or an overt creation of a particular subculture, rather than a semi-regular activity or pure entertainment (Alvin 6). As a result, they represent an active step in creating a niche community of film lovers (who almost certainly also patronize art house theaters) that have common interests and social goals directly linked to going to the movies (de Ville 106).

As Andrea Comisky notes, the prominence of theaters on college campuses in the 60s and 70s played an important role in creating a demographic of younger cinephiles. This is particularly important given Austin Film Society's initial proximity to UT-Austin's film culture and Linklater's intention to expand upon the offerings of the university, which proved vital to its success. On-campus film screenings were often more diverse and less expensive options for students and the public alike compared to movie theaters in their communities, screening a variety of films from recent American releases, foreign films, documentaries, and other alternatives (avant-garde, student films, and so on). While these screenings could be university-sponsored, student clubs also tended to host screenings that could be more politically driven or serve other counter-cultural ends. Comisky notes the scale of university film audiences, citing The University of Wisconsin-Madison's Fall 1973 semester which admitted 31,000 students to various

films (1). It would be this culture of filmgoing that created a generation of cinephiles and filmmakers, including but certainly not limited to Richard Linklater.

By putting art house theater and microcinema literature in conversation with one another, this thesis attempts to discuss how AFS Cinema has shifted Austin's film culture over time, as well as how these imagined and targeted communities might have significantly changed over time. In doing so, it's possible to then see how the spirit of Austin as an indie capitol is alive and well, though in a much different way than many have written about it since the city's growth and development. These literatures will also help to address whether art house theaters such as AFS Cinema might now uphold more dominant, and ultimately exclusionary, cultures surrounding film exhibition, despite any intentions when first established, and how Hyperreal has come to stand as an example of Austin's new alternative film culture. By giving attention to alternatives such as Hyperreal, I also aim to expand ideas of what microcinemas can offer as Hyperreal moves to exhibit a more inclusive and expansive body of film that challenge the dominant art film exhibition practices we see today. Overall, the hope is to provide a more nuanced perspective on what is happening within Austin's film community and to see how local theaters such as AFS Cinema may or may not play a part in the development of unique communities as the cities in which they operate evolve over time.

THEORY

In order to properly understand the ways in which art houses and other exhibition venues approach the task of creating identity and community through their respective

services and practices, one of the most important theoretical ideas that would inform this thesis is that of community itself. Theorizing community can happen in a variety of different ways depending on one's focus: geographic, identity formation, shared socio-cultural-economic practices, or any combination of these, and more.

Considering that AFS and other groups often are seen as independent (or "indie") and that they envision themselves as serving Austin more generally, thinking about how these labels and missions have come to be and how they might be used by AFS, or other similar groups, are important. Notably, Pierre Bourdieu's conception of cultural and economic capital explores how certain labels and groups function as ways of legitimizing certain groups, practices, and ideals. Film scholars such as Michael Newman more recently tend to refer heavily to Bourdieu when analyzing indie film culture. By turning to Bourdieu's conceptions of social capital, as well as his understanding of how these inform aesthetic consumption and notions of taste, I hope to be able to see how the films offered by each group informs their respective imagined/ideal audience, and how these offerings affect the ways that taste, as a hegemonic force, is formed in each viewing context. Through these taste cultures, examining the respective communities of these groups will hopefully result in a better understanding of how art houses like AFS Cinema occupy a more dominant cultural position within the Austin film community as a whole.

AFS Cinema, like most other art house theaters, try to appeal to certain groups of people as their ideal audience. Conceptions of such audiences can range from more general ones like the city's population, or more specifically to cinephilic moviegoers or social elites within Austin's established film scene (notable producers, directors, and the

like). This is important for not only determining who they want to bring into the theater, but also for understanding the values of the organization itself in terms of *why* these groups are considered desirable, and why others might implicitly not be. As such, paying specific attention to which groups are really being targeted or appealed to will be central to understanding what AFS Cinema and other groups are doing, and who they value most as the people who can make what they want to do possible. While some ideas might involve a general audience, things may or may not point to other groups being more valued, though not necessarily engaged, in the act of viewing or exhibition.

Alongside, or perhaps within, this idea of community is that of subculture. Given that AFS has a self-described loyal fanbase of cinema members and donors, I think it is important to see how AFS Cinema creates and promotes certain kinds of behavior and thinking around the act of going to the movies. Though this kind of work isn't so focused on film subculture, the work of Dick Hebdige (*Subculture: The Meaning of Style*) as well as Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (*Resistance Through Rituals*) would be useful in order to understand how people come together under certain identities and create specific practices and identities that produce certain kinds of lifestyles or habits, in this case how it pertains to moviegoing preferences and habits. Along with this, Hebdige's understanding of the ways in which hegemonic institutions ultimately co-opt more radical subcultural practices, dulling their countercultural edge, would be a useful frame of looking at AFS Cinema. Given that it has transitioned from a more countercultural, DIY operation to one that is modeled after traditional art house exhibition strategies, AFS Cinema may move back and forth between branding strategies in order to appeal to both

alternative and more mainstream audiences. Tracing AFS's growth through this lens, then, would help me to better understand both where it has historically been situated within the larger framework of hegemonic/dominant film exhibition practices, but how its own image has (or has not) changed during this period of growth and change.

Resistance Through Rituals serves as a foundation for understanding the ways that (youth) culture is formed, which for looking at both AFS Cinema and Hyperreal will be useful in understanding how each group respectively develops certain rituals and practices around filmgoing. Their working definition of culture as "the level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life, and give expressive form to their social and material life-experience" is a somewhat general, yet very useful, definition that allows for an easy way to look into the ways each group sees themselves as creating and offering unique filmgoing experiences (10). Beyond these simple definitions, the ways in which Hebdige is aware of culture as being a function of other identity markers, particularly class, will be illustrative in seeing how the identities and cultures of AFS Cinema and Hyperreal are informed by how accessible their programming is to members of different classes, and how these attitudes might reflect (anti-)commercial ideals in the act of film exhibition.

The ways in which institutions like AFS play into, or potentially contradict, subcultural formation prove an important aspect to consider when addressing the idea of local film going communities. It would also be interesting to take this concept into account when considering Hyperreal, given that it most likely, as an organization, has a purpose that is more directly aligned with subcultural activity that is more wholly distinct

from that of AFS or other larger film exhibition systems or practices. What films tend to be shown by each group and how do they fit into a certain brand of film? Or not fit? How are the films shown, as well as the context they're shown in provide a space for people to develop a shared cultural identity? The idea of subculture would be key to understanding these questions of each group.

All of these ideas should in some way be considered with the product (films) in mind just as much as they are with these organizations themselves, as they are the main thing that are meant to attract audiences and build their envisioned communities. Looking again at Michael Newman's work, as well as some of Wilinsky's, will help me think about how certain kinds of films might be used by theaters to form an institutional identity, which in turn influences the ways they market themselves, and to whom they market.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis primarily relies on discourse analysis of different advertisements (pre-show ads, fliers), documents (membership forms, membership appeals), as well as other public communications (e-mails, website, social media posts) to see how AFS Cinema and Hyperreal respectively address and relate to their communities, as well as from local news publications, interviews with various individuals of different working capacities (programmers, founders, and so on), and finally some content analysis of the film schedules from each organization. These three main methods of analysis help illustrate how organizations like AFS and Hyperreal present themselves in both their

explicit/public image and their more implicit modes of presentation such as programming.

I mainly look at various print and online materials that come from these groups both past and present (of which AFS would ideally have more material to look at) in order to get a more comprehensive view of how each group has presented themselves, and observe any possible shifts in this over time. I also use other archival materials such as posters, fliers, and press coverage in order to look at how these groups present themselves, as well as how they are presented by third parties. Analyzing documents such as these would serve two purposes. First, I am able to see from a more historical perspective how Linklater first advertised and framed AFS screenings and events. And second, I am able to compare those to what AFS (as well as Hyperreal) is currently doing and how AFS has reframed these same types of events in current advertisements or other documentation. I primarily look for discourses surrounding the appeal or status of various events, paying particular attention to any kinds of rhetorical uses of "indie" culture or other ways of trying to distinguish themselves from more mainstream screenings, as well as any kind of mentioning of exclusivity with these events.

My use of interviews allows me to get first-hand information from the people that are actually organizing events and creating the outwardly-facing appearance and reputation of AFS and Hyperreal Film Club. Similarly, talking to programmers, other staff members, or other people who are currently in key positions of the organization would provide updated/different information in terms of how people currently envision AFS's role in this community. Talking to those involved at Hyperreal who work in

similar capacities as well offer an interesting perspective, as they are in a position of both exhibitors for their group, as well as audience members for AFS, so that would certainly provide some insight into what they are doing, why, and how when AFS exists and (arguably) does something similar.

Finally, I do some content analysis of the kinds of programming that AFS offers in order to potentially see what kinds of people they might be targeting or attracting to their organization, whether or not they may be aware of that or not. Seeing where the movies they show sit in a larger context of taste and quality would indicate what they deem as important to be showing in terms of what they think their community wants.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Given that at least part of this thesis is concerned with the development of AFS over time, this thesis is written chronologically, starting with a look at the origins of AFS and its status as a more grassroots group and comparing it to how both they and Hyperreal operate currently. As such, the chapters will each focus on a certain moments for each group and how they are creating different kinds of filmgoing communities within the city.

Chapter 2 focuses on the beginnings of AFS by looking at what factors prompted the creation of the cinema/group within the context of Austin's then-emerging film scene. In doing so, I contextualize AFS's establishment within a broader American context of rising indie film (the Sundance moment) while also considering the ways in which AFS was filling a gap within Austin's film exhibition offerings. As AFS was initially meant to

serve as an accessible alternative to mainstream theaters and campus screenings by offering more unique and expansive programming. I come to an understanding of the early goals of AFS as well as the general attitude around what was going on.

Chapter 3 looks at AFS Cinema in the contemporary moment now that it has become an established institution with its own multi-screen theater with its hands in local film production. Through interviews with individuals who are involved with the theater at this moment, from programmers to artistic directors, I come to an understanding of where AFS's priorities currently are in regard to their role as an exhibitor in the Austin film community and how their business model may or may not influence this role. Looking at art house scholarship, situating AFS Cinema in a larger history of art houses and their goals provides interesting insight into what they see as indie in terms of their offerings and relationship to other institutions. Looking at their programming with attention to national release schedules (particularly for repertory screenings) also allows me to see how AFS may or may not be beholden to national release trends that might make it less specific of an exhibitor, despite their attention to the community.

After this look at AFS Cinemas past and present I turn my attention to Hyperreal Film Club and what they provide to Austin as an exhibition space in Chapter 4. Thinking about Hyperreal in the context of microcinemas, an understanding of what they are trying to do with their programs and events, will shed a different light on what current grassroots film exhibition looks like in this city, and what factors are influencing the decisions that go into the programming and general attitude of a more autonomous

alternative to indie institutions such as AFS Cinema while still existing in and promoting a largely similar attitude to viewing film.

With all of this taken into account, I come to a better understanding of Austin's film exhibition culture that's more suitable given the city's current, shifting identity from relatively quiet Texan city to a tech metropolis. Having done so, in my concluding chapter I look to the future in order to consider possible ways these local groups might maintain some sense of this established community after a time where collective moviegoing of almost all kinds, save for drive-ins, is stopped due to COVID-19. How are these groups trying to keep audiences engaged with virtual screenings, and what future might there be that may or may not incorporate these screenings with in-person fare in a post-Covid world, whatever that may look like?

Chapter 2: Punk-Tinged Exhibition

"Uh, I don't do much really, I just read, and work here,
and, uh, sleep and eat, and, uh, watch movies."
Anti-Artist*, Slacker* (1991)

When I first moved to Austin for graduate school, I remember walking down Guadalupe street, which runs along the west side of UT Austin's campus, and seeing a marquee with large letters spelling "DOBIE." Unfortunately, as I got closer, it became clear that the building that once held a small theater is now a multi-purpose space for dining, exercise, and an urban Target store. While this sign now is a somewhat anachronistic piece of decor used for little more than nostalgia and some extra advertising space for the various tenants occupying the space, it also stands as a marker of Austin's former offerings for film exhibition, as well as the more general film culture that was beginning to take shape and slowly become what it is today.

Austin's reputation as a city known in part for its film culture was arguably established in the 1960s when UT Austin formed its communications school, which included the newly formed Radio-Television-Film (RTF) department. Not long after this program was formed, a stronger film culture began to take shape in the city with the rise of groups such as CinemaTexas, an on-campus screening group run by RTF graduate students. CinemaTexas offered multiple screenings of foreign and hard-to-see films for the general public while also producing essays and notes on the films shown, along with helping to launch careers of individuals like Louis Black, who would go on to run the Austin Chronicle. And while this program was ultimately short-lived, the spirit that came

from these screenings managed to live on, and the people who were behind them stayed local, going on to write for local newspapers and keeping some semblance of film appreciation alive in the city.

During this time of expanded interest in film as an academic discipline and the growing reputation of UT Austin's RTF department, Austin's more general reputation in relation to its film culture would be closely tied to that of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, a low-budget, underground (yet sensational) horror film that became the blueprint for the kind of film that would be made in the city. Other early notable films for developing the city's identity include Eagle Pennell's *The Whole Shootin' Match* (1978) and *Honeysuckle Rose* (1980), which gave the city clout in both indie circles and in Hollywood, respectively (Patoski 186). By this time, the city had become a hot-spot for young filmmakers (or more generally people interested in film) looking for a home-grown, functional, and fresh alternative to working in Hollywood.

One individual seeking this kind of approach to both filmmaking and alternative culture was Richard Linklater, who moved to Austin from Huntsville, Texas in 1983 after working on offshore oil rigs with the intent of doing two things: watching movies and making movies (Patoski 180). Upon moving to Austin, Linklater soon became immersed in it's budding film scene, going to as many film screenings as he possibly could through either the university or other venues. Over time, however, he found that his desire to see as many films as possible was being stifled by somewhat repetitive offerings by CinemaTexas since their programming was often tied to courses offered in RTF. In order to expand upon the offerings of the university, he took things into his own hands and

started his own series of film screenings that wouldn't be shown at either the regular theaters in town or at the screenings held by CinemaTexas and the Texas Union Theater that showed films on UT's campus. While this operation was not formally named so at this point, these screenings were the groundwork being put in place for the establishment of what would become The Austin Film Society.

Within the context of Austin's film scene, its alternative culture more generally, as well as the national growth of industrial interest in independent film in America beginning years prior, the screenings and series that Linklater started stood as a legitimate, alternative, and most importantly successful venue for film exhibition at a time when public film viewing belonged mostly to larger institutions. Because of the status of these screenings as operating outside of the established industrial and institutional settings for film screenings, Linklater cultivated a dedicated local audience of film lovers in a way that centered a DIY and cinephilic approach to film exhibition through the use of certain promotional materials, an expanded and more experimentally-oriented film program, and the use of less formal spaces such as homes or make-shift theaters in order to encourage the growth of a homegrown community of film lovers.

PRECURSORY EXHIBITORS

Leading up to the screenings that Linklater was putting on, there was at least some kind of film culture within the city that was somewhat established because of the relatively wide breadth of film that was offered by various institutions and exhibitors. Like most cities at the time, there were several venues where people could go to watch

films, and Austin was no exception, with several theaters, ranging from those on the university campus to other theaters in the city, offering programming ranging from current American films to foreign films. These filmgoing options stood as typical examples of the major institutions that moviegoers interacted with at this point in time. What is of particular interest in this case, however, is the prominence of the university within this ecosystem of film exhibition as a major player in the industry both as a place to see movies *at all*, but also as a place to see more alternative and classic films that would be unavailable otherwise until Linklater got involved in exhibition. These institutions, particularly the university, together laid the groundwork for an interest in foreign and alternative film that would be essential for the success of AFS.

At this point in time, the popularity of art house theaters in the United states had impacted the types of movies shown in larger cities. In the 1950s and 60s, popularization of European films (with notable titles such as *The Seventh Seal* [1957], *La Dolce Vita* [1960], and *L'Eclisse* [1962]) shown at venues such as these managed to create a market for films that were a distinct alternative to the look, form, and appeal of films coming out of Hollywood that appealed to more distinct audiences that saw films as something more than entertainment (Gomery 180). While there were some venues in Austin that showed foreign and art films, such as the Village Theater (now an Alamo Drafthouse location), the university campus was very much so considered the center of moviegoing in the city, especially for art films (Nafus). On campus there were four different theaters that were in regular operation: Jester Auditorium, Texas Union Theater, Batts Auditorium, and the Dobie Theater, each offering individual and unique types of programming ranging from

more classic American films to more recent foreign films, along with some commercial theaters on Guadalupe Street, the main street along UT Austin's campus, such as the Varsity Theater.

For example, in March of 1974, films such as *Belle Du Jour* (1967), *Rashomon* (1950), and a Charles Chaplin series screened at Jester Auditorium, while the Texas Union Theater ran a musical series featuring *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) and *Easter Parade* (1948), a "Saturday Morning Fun Club" screening *Flash Gordon* (1974), as well as regular programming including *State of Siege* (1972) and *Heartbreak Kid* (1972), among many other titles (Bump 83-84). All of these films were open to the public for a maximum price of $1.50 (with lower prices for students), which also made these films extremely accessible for anyone who was interested in seeing any of these films, contrary to the pricing models of little theaters and other art house theaters that charged a higher price for patrons who felt "alienated by Hollywood's appeal to the middle class" (qtd. Wilinsky 50).

Along with these screenings, there were the weekly screenings that were held as a part of the film courses offered by the university, which were also open to the public. Such offerings were consistent with the growth of film screenings on university campuses in the 1970s, as noted by Andrea Comisky who found that one could watch a movie of various kinds (foreign, classic Hollywood, recent releases, documentaries, and so on) on some university campuses nearly every day of the week (2).

Significantly, foreign films largely were screened by one group: CinemaTexas. The period between the early 1970s and mid-1980s was a period in which a rich film

culture, inspired in part by the cinephilic community of the French New Wave, was being formed within the department, and CinemaTexas (a play on "cinematheque") was the primary focus for this group. Run largely by the graduate students of UT Austin's RTF department, CinemaTexas was the film programming unit at the university that put on two screenings a night, four nights a week, that screened films both for courses and to supplement the course offerings (C. Berg 1). It was these screenings specifically that served as a major influence on the tastes and opinions of not only the students enrolled in the film program, but also the general public and local filmmakers. The general atmosphere of the campus at this time was that you'd choose one of three or four movies showing on a given night, the crowd would be composed of majority students with other people mixed in, and afterward there would be a natural, casual congregation of people who wanted to discuss the films (Macor 9). It was an ideal place for anyone, from aspiring filmmakers to writers of various degrees, to strengthen their general knowledge of cinema.

CinemaTexas also illustrates the trend in filmgoing in the 20th century of non-commercial exhibition venues that promoted an increased intellectual interest in film. Writing on these venues, Barbara Wilinsky includes sites such as film societies, amateur film clubs, museum series, and college courses as places that encouraged the study of film and focused on intellectuals who were interested in pursuing such study (60). CinemaTexas, in functioning as a hybrid of a film club (as illustrated by their explicit inspiration from the French New Wave and French cinematheques) and being directly tied to the university system, functioned to some degree in this mode of filmgoing which

afforded individuals opportunities to acquire cultural capital. For each of the screenings, graduate students would write program notes, which were four-page essays detailing production notes, critical reception, and various contexts for the films and their directors that would be distributed to attendees (Berg 2). For the average person attending these screenings, these notes provide an opportunity to accumulate a kind of embodied cultural capital via socialization to culture and cultural objects, in this case specific kinds of foreign and art films provided by the university (Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital" 19). However, for the individuals writing the program notes and running the screenings themselves, these screenings provided opportunities to not only glean this embodied capital by viewing these films (usually more than once), but also trade that capital for a more institutional form of cultural capital by putting this work (and investment of time) towards academic qualifications (Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital" 21). By not only presenting films that are a part of the cinematic canon (which was largely being built at that point in time), from US film history to Hollywood auteurs and the avant-garde, but framing that viewing in an academic context, CinemaTexas (and the university more generally) fostered an atmosphere film appreciation tied to certain ways of appreciating culture informed by an intellectual and artistic framework.

These screenings proved vital to establishing the foundations of Austin's early local film culture, as the graduate students who facilitated the screenings would eventually disperse into different parts of Austin's community at large. As such, these individuals unknowingly laid the groundwork for future cinematic endeavors. For example, a handful of students, including Louis Black and Marge Baumgarten, went on

to work for The Austin Chronicle, a local alternative publication that was critically important for the later success of Linklater's initial screenings (Patoski 181). So, while this particular venue was relatively short-lived, it proved that there was a strong demographic of people who would go to see these types of films.

After CinemaTexas had largely dissipated, Linklater was still known to attend as many screenings offered by both UT Austin and Austin Community College (where he was enrolled as a student for a short time) as possible. However, when he eventually decided to pursue his own kind of film programming and exhibition with Austin Media Works (which would eventually be renamed Austin Film Society), his overall intention seemed to deviate from the stricter context of the university setting (Nafus). By 1985, he'd seen just about anything the universities could offer, noting that they kept showing the same titles to each group of students, prompting his desire to see films that even the university wouldn't show (Patoski 181). As such, his envisioned exhibition strategy seemed to be one that stood directly in opposition to (or at the very least as a supplement to) the university, but with its own goals and objectives (perhaps not entirely separate from a simple desire for Linklater to see the movies he wanted to see). This stance would subsequently inform many aspects of his events, from the ways in which he advertised them to the spaces these screenings took place in themselves.

PROMOTIONAL TACTICS AND AESTHETICS

Arguably, one of the most important aspects of showing film in any setting is advertising the events in the first place in order to assure that an audience will be present

when the lights go dim. Given that the screenings that Linklater was programming functioned largely, if not entirely, outside of the usual institutions involved in film distribution, advertising, and exhibition, he needed to approach the promotion for his screenings and series on his own without the financial support of the groups that work within the industry that facilitate the advertising and promotion of films in a more large-scale sense. As a solution to this social and outsider industrial position, Linklater used a network of local film lovers, as well as taking on an approach to advertising inspired by DIY punk culture both aesthetically and in practice, screenings put on by Linklater targeted a youth demographic that existed beyond those enrolled at the university or other mainstream audiences. Thus, these early screenings were able to establish a base of support from a loosely existing community that sought film and experiences that stood in opposition to the typical experience that was expected of going to the movies in any previously known capacity.

Early on, in a more traditional method of getting the word out for these screenings, Linklater utilized his connections to local print publications, namely The Austin Chronicle, as a majority of the people who were on the writing staff came from either the UT Austin film graduate program or were involved in CinemaTexas before its demise (Black). Through these connections with film lovers that were more ingrained in the media and academic ecosystem of the city, Linklater was able to get some free advertising space in The Austin Chronicle for his screenings, including their monthly "Midnight Experimental Film" series that was part of the group's early programming (Patoski 179). Linklater's successful capitalization upon his established circle of peers

that were invested, whether personally or professionally, in the existence of a local filmgoing community shaped by experiences while working within the university system as graduate students would prove to be of vital importance. Since some of these people now working at The Austin Chronicle had already been supplementing the screenings put on by the university, Linklater's endeavor, in its cinephilic tendencies, looked to serve similar ends to that of CinemaTexas by seeking to expand upon a system that kept showing a limited number of canonical, teachable, films (Patoski 181). Being able to put these ads in a newspaper served as a more traditional avenue of advertising a less traditional moviegoing experience. To supplement this advertising, Linklater's other main method of advertising presents a more focused attempt at reaching what could be seen as these screenings' target audience: The city's youth, slackers, and punks.

Speaking on the topic of advertising for the aforementioned Midnight Experimental program of films from 1985, Linklater has also noted the importance, and perhaps a preference for, the use of flyers to advertise his events because of the control that he and his friends could exercise over marketing their work. Linklater stated: "We were like a band. Lee [Daniel] had no patience to book a film or do any of the bureaucratic shit. Lee liked putting up flyers. At one in the morning, he'd go out flyering," posting the flyers on telephone poles around the university campus "as if a punk battle of the bands was being promoted instead of five edgy films most students had never heard of" (Patoski 182, 180). These kinds of flyers, as well as the intentions and motivation behind using them, have a history rooted in punk and DIY subculture and are typically intended to speak to and circulate within those kinds of social circles.

Within the more general subcultural field of punk and DIY, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, flyers have not only become one "embodiment of the democratization of art that punk brought about," but have been considered a significant and effective method for individuals (musicians or bands, artists, programmers, and the like) to reach out to a specific, desired community (qtd. Ensminger 3). Oftentimes using rough, unpolished (but not without purpose) collage or cut-up aesthetics, punk flyers allow for a type of artistic freedom that suggests that anyone, particularly youth that fall outside of dominant systems of cultural production, can participate in both the event and culture that these flyers promote. So, while they may not be an ideal method for attracting large *general* audiences, they manage to project cultural ideals that speak to more working class people already in or adjacent to those social circles and allow them to enter spaces that welcome them. Chon Noriega, writing on Chicano poster art of the 1970s and 80s, summarized the effect that posters not dissimilar to the ones produced by punks across the United States had in regard to reaching specific audiences, saying that

> The medium is the message. But if the medium is poster art… then the message is community. The poster exists somewhere between the unique art object and the mass media. It blends the formal qualities of both in order to reach an audience neither cares about: urban exiles in search of community. (Noriega 23)

As such, members of punk and DIY communities use posters as a way to communicate with one another about events, as well as a way to participate in cultural production with a style and purpose that subverts typical notions of mass advertising.

As far as Linklater's use of flyers is concerned, the aesthetic qualities that posters advertising these early film screenings look like they could be as much for a Butthole Surfers show as they are for experimental or foreign film screenings. Looking at the posters and other advertisements (Fig. 2.1) that Linklater was producing for these shows, it's clear that these pieces were not necessarily meant to attract a general film audience,

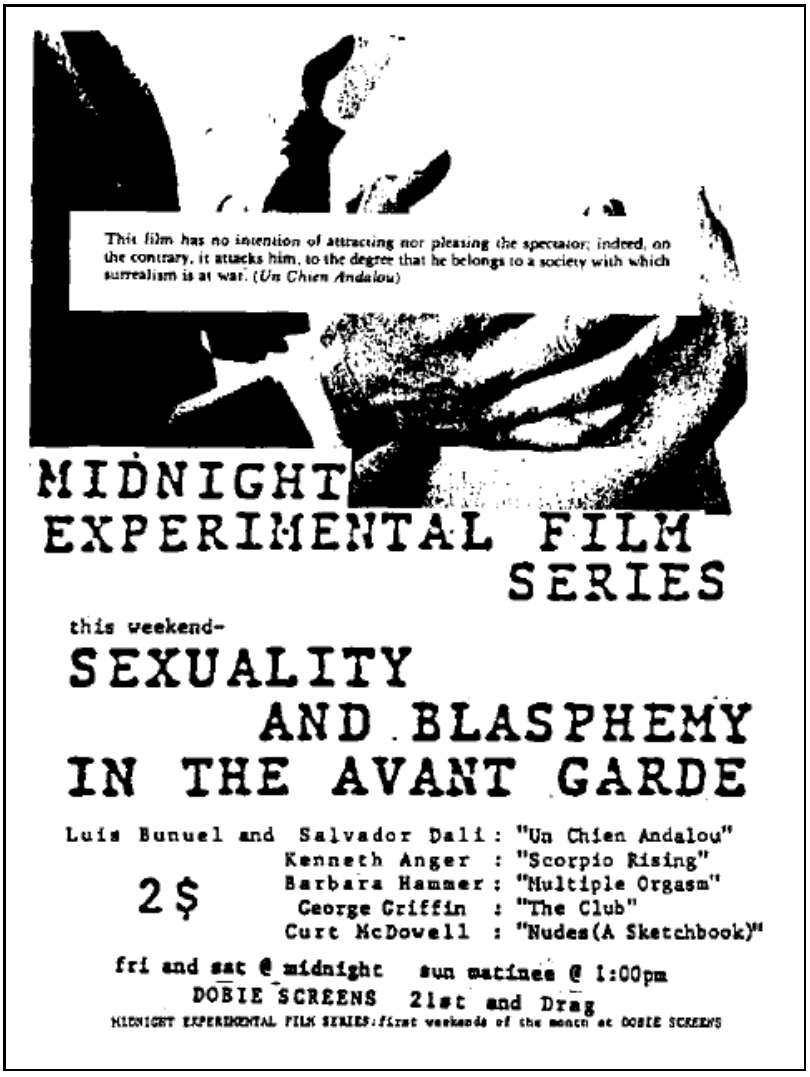


Fig. 2.1 Flyer for the Midnight Experimental Film Series, 1985. Courtesy of Austin Film Society.

but rather people who would be more interested in challenging, or perhaps even unenjoyable, films. In a Bourdieusian sense, the textual and aesthetic arrangement of this flyer is an "opportunity to experience or assert one's position in a social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept" in relation to a dominant film culture (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 50). Using the aesthetics of punk flyers, Linklater managed to contextualize the act of moviegoing, one historically held by film production companies, national chains, and even universities, within an alternative social frame of reference.

It's perhaps no coincidence that this first notable (as far as the written history of AFS is concerned) screening is for surrealist works, a movement whose members largely held anti-bourgeois beliefs. Looking specifically at the poster for the Midnight Experimental Films screening, an oppositional attitude comes through in the visual style of the poster, along with what information is offered to readers. The most important (and only) feature of this poster that situates the screening in such a context is the header image. Referencing Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), the experimental film series flyer pairs a still from the film of a man forcefully grabbing a woman's breast and a quote from Buñuel about the film that reads "This film has no intention of attracting nor pleasing the spectator; indeed, on the contrary, it attacks him, to the degree that he belongs to a society with which surrealism is at war."

Though this quote might not be neatly applied to each of the films listed, the cut-up aesthetic of the flyer works in a way that puts those films within the same context and value system as Buñuel does for *Un Chien Andalou*. Linklater makes it explicit that the films he's showing are not necessarily meant to be enjoyable (at least compared to a

Hollywood film), though that lack of enjoyability does not detract from their value as films that push formal and social boundaries. Their content doesn't even really matter in the grand scheme of things, since nothing beyond a film's title and director are listed, so the appeal for these films has to come from their general content (sexuality and blasphemy), their form (surrealism), and their almost sensational aspect as derived from the quote. Instead, the flyer itself asks the reader whether or not they belong to the system, society, or culture that these films aim to run against by suggesting that one *can* enjoy them if they somehow (want to) live outside of it. In that sense, the poster works as a pretty direct appeal to punk individuals and ideals in that it becomes a "mode of 'anarchic' discourse" that sets its sights on bourgeois (for surrealists), corporate (for punks), or institutional frameworks (Hebdige 105). To use Linklater's words directly, "the film programming at the university was kind of the opposition," and this set of films served to both expand on what they offered to Austin's moviegoing public, and also ask them to be open to alternative modes of expression and consumption (Patoski 183).

APPROACHES TO PROGRAMMING

In organizing the screenings for Austin Media Arts, Linklater's programming strategies and preferences not only stemmed from his personal desire to see films he had not already seen, but to fill in the various gaps that were left by the programming at the university in a post-CinemaTexas moment (Nafus). Because Linklater's film education (formally and informally) up to that point had largely come from the screenings put on by UT Austin and Austin Community College, the films that he ended up programming

reflected a desire to introduce people to films and artists that they wouldn't have ever heard of before because there were no places willing to show them. As such, the film programs he put together appealed to a more underground audience with similar cinephilic interests and tastes because of his willingness to program a mix of films that came from more well-known directors, as well as regional and avant-garde filmmakers.

Cinephilia is perhaps the most apt term to use in order to approach Linklater's programming habits at this point in time. As someone who would watch upwards of 600 films in a year, Linklater's drive to see, as well as share, as many movies as possible is reflective of cinephilia as an explicit strategy for film programming (Patoski 181). In his book on film programming, film scholar Peter Bosma identifies two underlying dichotomic motivations for cinephilic behavior: watching films in order to have an aesthetic experience (film's intrinsic artistic value), and watching films as a means to realize a socially involved ideal (film's instrumental social value), the latter potentially done in an activist framework (20). These two motivations aren't meant to be extremes that are strictly opposed to one another, rather they inform several identifiers of this passion for cinema, including (1) a general way of forming a shared identity, a group of like-minded people, (2) a source of inspiration for film directors, (3) a marketing tool within the film trade, (4) a critical method, a foundation for evaluation, and (5) a source of curating film and assembling surprising weekly programs or double bills (Bosma 20-25). Linklater's curatorial strategy relies in some way on each of these reasons, some more directly than others, as a way to differentiate his screenings from those offered by a typical venue motivated by other reasons to show films. Particularly, his focus on both

Fig 2.2 Advertisement for upcoming screenings and series, February-May 1988. Courtesy of Austin Film Society.

Fig. 2.3 Advertisement for upcoming screenings and series, February-May 1988. Courtesy of Austin Film Society.

known directors, as well as newer, unknown independent filmmakers (a term that wasn't really in use at the time) demonstrate his intention to create a program that fostered a cinephilic attitude more generally that focused on expanding the film canon that was being established and taught by the university.

In order to understand the kind of cinephilic approach to programming Linklater was bringing to these events, it's important to take note of the films shown themselves. Looking at the slate of programming that was set for February through May of 1988 (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3), one can't help but be slightly overwhelmed (and possibly overjoyed) by just how expansive the scope of these screenings is. Largely, screenings are organized around series based on either a specific director (Jean-Luc Godard and Nagisa Oshima, here), or by a theme based on country of origin or genre/form (Russian Avant-Garde, London Filmmakers, Experimental/Underground), and within each of these series is a wide variety of films ranging from well-known titles from internationally famous filmmakers (Chantal Akerman, Sergei Eisenstein) to relatively unknown regional or underground filmmakers (Jon Jost, Joel Demott). While some of these films and directors would certainly be encountered and taught in a university course, by programming them in a cinephilic manner the context of viewing shifts from one concerned with film as an object of study to one of cultural immersion and enjoyment where new connections and ideas about the films can be made. In this sense, the reworking and recontextualization of canonical films among other lesser-known works can be considered a form of bricolage.

Conceived by Claude Levi-Strauss, bricolage is the process of "re-ordering and re-contextualisation of objects to communicate fresh meanings, within a total system of

significances, which already includes prior and sedimented meanings attached to the objects used" (Clarke 177). Here, objects and meanings constitute a sign, and when these signs are assembled within any culture they are organized into certain kinds of discourse that "erase or subvert their original straight meanings" (Hebdige 104). The bricoleur, thus, works to relocate objects in different positions in order to create a new discourse, and a new message. While this idea has been taken up by cultural studies scholars to talk about objects such as clothing within subcultural groups (see Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*), this concept may be useful to bring into the discussion of film programming by taking up individual films as the cultural object(s) that constitute a discourse of important or valuable cinema. The films that Linklater was choosing for these programs and series include titles and subjects that at the time would likely be shown in universities and art house theaters (titles such as *Breathless* [1959]) as key titles for film movements or certain national cinemas, as well as ones that might go unseen because of a lack resources or access to larger distribution networks. And while major titles and directors are not entirely removed from their historical contexts in favor of some grand rewriting of cinema history, the titles that are shown hint at a desire to *expand* any idea of what important cinema looks like by viewing directors like Godard in the same league as relatively unknown directors like Jon Jost or James Benning. Especially at a time when ideas of American independent cinema were just starting to take shape, highlighting such films amongst established auteurs works to elevate them to a higher cultural importance that wouldn't have been granted by more influential institutions. Within this viewing context, singular films no longer carry more cultural

significance than another or stand as representative of entire movements, rather each film stands as a piece to a larger whole that is cinema writ large.

Linklater's logic behind choosing these films was relatively simple as well. If he could get a copy of it from a distributor and he wanted to watch it, it'd likely be shown. As his personal taste in film was evolving in these first few years of putting on these screenings, that taste would be reflected pretty directly in what was shown (Nafus). The titles that were screened aren't dependent on (nor are they totally detached from) an overarching narrative of film history or course curriculum, instead they come from a more autonomous approach designed to serve an audience that is willing to approach viewing with a similar interest. Such autonomy is oftentimes seen as a crucial aspect of independent or alternative culture, as it typically implies a greater degree of authenticity (Newman, "Indie Culture" 19). In this case, such authenticity comes across in the desire to share and appreciate these films rather than show them purely for an economic gain or to demonstrate a level of cultural sophistication by programming unknown films (Nafus). At the heart of this operation is a true desire (at least in the eyes of this writer) to watch more movies and share that love of cinema with other people who have similar interests and consumption habits. Knowing that these kinds of films wouldn't be shown on campus or in the theaters operating in the city, Linklater's programming demonstrated an unbiased selection of films based on their value within other systems or institutions. His selections remained true to his interests, and knowing that his network of friends already ingrained in an alternative and oppositional subculture would also take an interest in

those films based on their alternative status worked in his favor for cultivating an audience, no matter how small, of people who became dedicated to these screenings.

EXHIBITION SPACE(S)

While one of the first major screenings for Austin Media Arts was the experimental film series that was hosted at the Dobie Theater, an established film venue, the typical spaces that these screenings took place in were a less official or complex affair, further reflecting a DIY attitude toward exhibition that would promote the growth of various networks of film lovers and producers. In doing so, these small screenings would stand as an early model of independent screening spaces that would come to be known as microcinemas.

Before these events began to actually take shape in a more public setting, the relatively small network of film lovers that were around Linklater (including Chale Nafus and George Morris) would largely hold screenings for each other and their friends at each other's apartments (Nafus). Initially started by Morris when he would have people like Linkater (along with friends Lee Daniel, Gary Price, and Jack Meredith) over to his apartment, these extremely casual screenings, which were more like friends getting together to watch something rather than any kind of official event, served as the initial places for them to see and discuss multiple films at a time and expand their personal knowledge of cinema history, including genres and titles that they would have otherwise ignored (Macor 91). It was during this time that Morris encouraged Linklater to start hosting his own screenings, which prompted him to show films at his and Daniel's

apartment in a similarly casual way. This would become the first times where what they were doing would resemble a film society. This especially early time for AFS was when Linklater had started programming series for other venues, including the experimental film series at the Dobie Theater, two series of films by Carl Dreyer and Robert Bresson in partnership with Austin Community College, and a retrospective of films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder for the Laguna Gloria art museum (Macor 92; Patoski 182).

Although these screenings were very successful, their connections with various institutions such as museums, established theaters, and universities highlights an important facet of screening alternative or art cinema at this point in time: that they largely had to be seen in these viewing contexts, which produce specific cultural meanings for the films shown. Because foreign and art house films could typically only be seen in these places, they subsequently take on a specific cultural status. Bourdieu notes that spaces such as these can function as classificatory schemes that not only serve to designate specific audiences which in turn qualify the product consumed within that context ("Production of Belief" 278). Historically, this has influenced the types of people that have come to comprise the typical idea of an art house audience, mainly being those that seek out alternatives to Hollywood cinema in both the films themselves and the venues as ways to distinguish the films as art and culture rather than simple entertainment (Wilinsky 46). So, while these kinds of films were being shown, the contexts in which they were being shown were still linked to ones that frame film as either an aesthetic or educational experience available to more elite audiences, rather than a more social experience open to as many people as possible. What seems to be most important about

these screenings, however, is that they proved to Linklater that there was in fact an audience for these kinds of films in Austin that could at least fill one hundred seat auditoriums (Patoski 182). With this in mind, Linklater was encouraged to host these screenings on his own terms since they would be financially viable enough to at least cover any costs for film rental.

After the success of these series, Linklater was able to acquire grants from the State of Texas in order to renovate the loft space above Captain Quackenbush's Intergalactic Café (a business located just off of UT Austin's campus who loaned the space to Linklater for free) into a more permanent and *public* location for his screenings (Macor 93). The space itself was relatively small, fitting anywhere from 40-50 people seated on folding chairs, with a makeshift projection booth made up of phone books and plywood and a makeshift screen (Nafus). Though it may have been considered somewhat shabby by many, Linklater and his network of friends loved it. The space was their own version of a cinematheque, one that would serve and emerge as a central point of convergence for a budding film community concerned with exhibition and eventually with production.

This cinema space can be most closely compared to that of little cinemas or, more explicitly, French cinematheques and film clubs. Little theaters, specifically, were early models of exhibition venues that demonstrated the potential for alternative art film cultures by not only showing alternative film, but also by deliberately offering an alternative atmosphere to those of movie palaces or other Hollywood venues (Wilinsky 46). Similarly, French cinematheques were small venues that tended to show old silent

films, films censored by the government, or other various films as a part of other events with socialist, avant-garde, and other social groups as a place to appreciate film in a more social setting (Smoodin 91-92). Both of these kinds of venues, intentionally or not, created certain kinds of expectations around the act of moviegoing, whether it be as ways to differentiate oneself from mainstream networks of culture (for little theaters) or to emphasize the aesthetic, cultural, and social importance of the medium (for French cinema clubs), and as such produced certain kinds of audiences and cultures around their respective screenings.

In the case of Austin Media arts, the extremely small and intimate setting seemed to work in a way that favored a more niche and dedicated audience that could be counted on to attend most of the screenings. Given that a good number of the people that came to these screenings were Linklater's friends, the screenings ended up being a very casual social space for people already belonging to an alternative culture in the city to mingle with people who maybe were outside of those immediate social circles but interested in the films nonetheless (Terence Malick would occasionally attend screenings, and, though unknown at the time, Wes Anderson was a regular attendee) (Nafus; Patoski 184). Because of this, Austin Media Arts became a place where, at the very least, you'd probably know the name of most everyone in the crowd and be able to casually talk to them about what had been screened.

There is also a way in which the space functioned as a meeting place for filmmakers and other, more production-oriented individuals, to meet and potentially network with each other, both on a local and national level. Although Linklater was still a

couple of years away from beginning his work on *Slacker* and other larger films such as *Dazed and Confused* (1993) or *Before Sunrise* (1995), Austin Media Arts managed to attract people with an interest in film that would end up helping him produce such projects. For example, Anne Walker, who would attend screenings semi-regularly, would eventually help manage the casting and production of *Slacker* (Nafus; "Slacker: Full Cast"). Given the fact that the space attracted both established and hopeful filmmakers, Austin Media Arts may be credited with giving Austin's film production culture the jump start that it had needed. And despite the fact that Austin Media arts was a small and local venue by its very nature, it also stands as an example of the idea that

> The local places of moviegoing… need to be re-presented not as autonomous, neutral, static places that contain audiences and movies, and that then can be 'compared' to other such places somewhere else, but as internally heterogeneous nodal points in a social, economic, and cultural cartography of cinema: intersections of overlapping trajectories, networks, trails and pathways, whose identities are constructed through the connections and collisions that occur there. (qtd. Bosma 16)

Austin Media Arts demonstrated the fact that, despite its small size, it remained a part of a larger, more national context of alternative and independent film culture alongside its own developing local culture. By inviting filmmakers from different parts of the country to talk about their films, Linklater built a network of like-minded people for himself later on in his career as a filmmaker, and generated connections more generally between Austin's film community and other similar ones that existed throughout the country. In

establishing or strengthening such a network, Linklater further creates a system in which independent and alternative filmmakers, and film lovers more generally, can operate in that doesn't rely on more formal or institutional networks within the film industry more generally.

CONCLUSION

The approach that Linklater took in starting Austin Media Arts' various screenings and events firmly established a starting point for an alternative film culture to take root in Austin. By working within already established social and subcultural circles that were interested in creating and participating in alternative culture, as well as a network of individuals that were involved in some of the city's media outlets, Linklater was able to reach an audience that already existed, but was underserved in the realm of independent film. Although at times he found that not many people would be as excited to watch upwards of ten Godard films as he was, Linklater was able to find that people were willing, and some especially eager, to participate in these kinds of events, and even potentially help him out with his future film productions or start their own (Patoski 183).

Eventually, Linklater applied for city funding in order to have the resources to host more events. As a way to make this funding more of a possibility was to establish Austin Media Arts as a nonprofit organization rather than a loose group of friends that were showing each other movies (Macor 92). Throughout this process, people who had been to some of these screenings reached out to support the transition and application process, highlighting the point that, in Linklater's words "You really rely on community

and help and favors. It's a real world of reciprocity" (qtd. Macor 92). Friends helped him throughout the process of achieving nonprofit status, and would come to make up the board of directors. Even after acquiring nonprofit status, and importantly changing the name of the organization to the Austin Film Society, things still worked pretty loosely as if few things had changed (the board of directors didn't actually officially meet for 10 years after being established) (Nafus).

Despite this, AFS began to grow and change as new ideas and opportunities presented themselves and Linklater became a larger figure in the national film scene with the breakout success of *Slacker* at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival and subsequent films including *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *Before Sunrise* (1995). With his personal success, Linklater began to look for ways to support other local filmmakers in Austin, financially or otherwise, and once the board of directors began to meet more regularly other ideas for the organization began to take shape, albeit slowly (Nafus). Over the years, these changes to AFS's core function as an exhibition space would come to create the version of the organization that exists in the current moment, one that is focused still on exhibition, but also has its hands in film and television production, as well as educational programs for both the public other youth-oriented courses. Exhibition, though, still sits at the heart of AFS and stands as the main point at which Austin's population interacts with the organization.

Chapter 3: From Attic to Art House

"I have this idea of my best self, and I wanted to pursue
that even if it might have been overriding my honest self."

Jesse, *Before Sunset* (2004)

Considering where and how Austin Film Society got started, it may have been hard to imagine or anticipate its success and growth. Even for those who were directly involved in AFS in its earliest years, the possibility that it would operate with a multi-million dollar yearly budget and officially employ upwards of 40 people (before March 2020) was almost unimaginable, perhaps laughably so (Nafus). From the early 2000s to the mid 2010s, AFS continued to hold screenings, almost constantly moving between various venues within the city, including at Alamo Drafthouse locations, their own Austin Studios, and the Marchesa Hall and Theater, the last of which would eventually become their current, permanent, screening location in 2017 (Whittaker). The establishment of AFS Cinema would mark an important moment for the Austin Film Society as a whole, as it allowed them to once again have a physical space where film screenings could serve as a meeting place for film lovers in Austin to congregate and experience films in a way that was guided more so by AFS's mission and belief as an organization. On the topic of the organization's acquisition of the theater space, artistic director Holly Herick stressed the importance to those dedicated to AFS that "[AFS's] mission is at the core of everything [it's] doing [with this space], so [it'll] continue to do the same kind of programming [and cultivate] a passion for global cinema" (qtd. Whittaker).

The growth of AFS more generally, keeping in mind its involvement in local production and education alongside exhibition, in combination with this official screening space and their mission to cultivate a passion for global cinema within Austin's film community, is a point which proves to be worthy of closer examination in regard to the actual identity of the audience and the community that AFS imagines and sees itself as creating. While the goals of creating a space for film lovers at AFS's screenings may have stayed relatively consistent throughout its existence, only changing from one curated by Linklater alone to one with an official programmer, or other guests, the organization's development from the mid-1990s to the 2010s and 2020 moved in the direction of what would be expected of a more mainstream art house theater. One constant, though, is AFS's mission to develop a passion for global cinema within the Austin community has remained central to their operation. This raises several questions, however, as to what this kind of "global cinema" is. What does it mean for Austin's film community to be engaging with these films? What kind of focus might AFS have when it comes to engaging with their conception of Austin's film community? What does this mean for Austin's community of film lovers?

AFS Cinema serves as an example of a local theater that is concerned with the needs and desires of its own community of film lovers while also being involved in larger networks of national and international film distribution and exhibition. While this is not necessarily a unique feature of AFS Cinema as an American art house theater (finding an art house that isn't involved in large distribution networks is likely impossible), the difference that this involvement makes in regard to how AFS Cinema appeals to their

audience as unique to their city is in need of some discussion. By looking at several aspects of AFS Cinema, as well as other characteristics and trends of typical art house theaters, the shift in priorities and attention to certain groups within Austin for the success of AFS Cinema, especially in comparison to its earlier iteration, starts to be a bit more clear. So, while AFS Cinema positions itself as an independent alternative to mainstream organizations and institutions, its status within the city and its connections to larger national networks of exhibition and distribution calls into question the degree to which AFS Cinema still stands as an oppositional, alternative, or autonomous entity.

ART HOUSES AND INDIE CULTURE

At the beginning of his essay "Leaving the Movie Theater," Roland Barthes attributes his reasons for going to the movies to either a "cultural quest" to see a desired film, an "object of a veritable preliminary alert," as well as a response to idleness, leisure, and free time (345). These motivations for filmgoing might be seen as pretty common, but they also speak to a specific set of habits for certain groups of filmgoers more generally. From nearly the beginning of their existence in a post-World War II socioeconomic landscape, American art house theaters were spaces that were caught up in hierarchies of taste and distinction for the people that ran them, as well as those that patronized them. Up until the 1940s, film exhibition was controlled primarily by five of the major film studios (known as the Big Five): Paramount Pictures, Loew's-MGM, 20th Century-Fox, Warner Bros., and RKO, which were all vertically integrated and as such tended to show their own films, or films from other, more minor, studios who didn't own

any theater chains. When little cinemas and other alternative venues began to appear, they were unable to book larger, more mainstream, films, and began to seek alternatives to the mainstream Hollywood films that were being produced. This would ultimately lead them to book foreign and other kinds of alternative films that the larger chains seemed to ignore under the assumption that they wouldn't generate as much revenue as new releases from Hollywood. While these theaters may not have found masses of people clamoring to see the latest European films, they did find that, because of the increased spending available to the elite middle and upper classes looking to distinguish themselves from the association of cinema as a middle-class activity, a kind of minority film culture within the United States arose (Wilinsky 53, 50).

In order to appeal to this more affluent and culturally literate demographic, the art film industry of the 1950s and 60s thus began to highlight certain aspects of the films that they would show, in particular aspects of artistry and other high-brow descriptors for European and avant-garde films. Exhibitors therefore sought what they saw as "films of quality" that could be seen as artistic endeavors (Twomey 240). The films that these theaters would show were not meant to entertain (at least not singularly), rather they would be fulfilling, thoughtful and intellectual, formally and stylistically different, and oftentimes ran counter to ideals presented by mainstream films and the film industry more generally. Foreign films, European ones in particular, were able to fit these categories given the fact that they explicitly did not have to adhere to American standards of film production at the time (Twomey 242).

This preference toward alternative modes of both film exhibition (for theaters) and consumption (for audiences) simultaneously established a kind of oppositional film culture as well as a distinctive taste culture within it which dictated what kinds of movies were considered to be worth seeing and which were simply mass-produced for a general, and implicitly less-cultured, audience. Because these alternative theaters oftentimes charged a higher price of admission to their films for these elevated films and a more upscale experience more generally, these oppositional and taste cultures became linked in some ways with a more wealthy, upper-class clientele while still being relatively accessible compared to other high-class activities like going to the opera, symphony, or live theater (Willinsky 109).

This cultural positioning would continue to become a somewhat contradictory one because of the ways in which alternative and independent film and exhibitors related to the evolving mainstream American film culture over the course of the latter half of the 20th century. Before discussing these changes and institutions as they presently exist, it's important to briefly discuss the development and deployment of the term "indie" compared to "independent" as it has come to be used within the film industry. The latter of these two categories is typically reserved for texts, authors, and institutions that sit firmly outside of, and often run counter to, the typical modes of cinematic production and consumption, such as avant-garde or art films. According to Michael Newman, "indie" is a widespread industrial term that arose during the Sundance-Miramax era as the primary alternative American cinema. However, in relation to "independent," "indie" represents a conception of independence that is "in some sense less independent than some

alternatives, and that more radically different work may be unsuitable for description as indie" (*Indie* 48, 26). Films such as *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), *Slacker* (1991) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) are the oft-cited examples of early American indie films given their smaller budgets and (at the time) new and relatively unknown directors. However, these films would often replicate aspects of mainstream films in the ways that they moved throughout larger systems of distribution, their methods of marketing, and their financial returns at the box office (Perren 30).

Despite the fact that these films were made more independently of mainstream production systems, they were acquired by more mainstream distributors (often as a part of their indie branches) and brought into that larger network of film while still retaining a kind of indie identity and categorization. To some, this seemed to be a co-optation of those grassroots, authentically indie modes of production and development that individuals like Richard Linklater relied on early in their careers as their only method of producing work the way they envisioned it to be.

Because of its consistent relationship with the mainstream, "indie" as a branding identity or sensibility functions as something of an opposition, distinct from the mainstream, but is still reliant upon the category of mainstream film to exist. Mainstream film culture remains a fluid and relational category that is typically created for people within indie communities to use in order to justify their investment in their own subculture (Newman, *Indie* 20). Without a dominant force, there cannot be an oppositional one, and thus no subculture. "Indie" also becomes an appeal toward people who seek a community of like-minded people who seek out such films, and ostensibly

hold other similar ideals that can be held in other aspects or areas of life. In a way, indie (as well as independent) cultures and communities are usually thought to be more democratic than mainstream counterparts, given the general idea that anyone can participate in them. This can happen by either shaping the culture itself with one's own contributions, or by giving the culture a perceived higher importance by putting their money toward local groups or individuals instead of large corporations.

Key in shaping this seemingly democratic perspective in indie communities are the institutions and venues where these kinds of films are shown. Oftentimes, these places determine the films' status within this indie/mainstream dichotomy, ultimately creating experiences and discourses through which they are experienced (Newman, *Indie* 51). Audiences tend to seek out indie films because of their status as texts and/or experiences that sit outside of the typical cinematic fare, and as such they seek out theses spaces where that desire can be fulfilled. However, because these indie institutions still largely function within the same systems of distribution, business, and capitalism more generally, the products and experiences offered to audiences serve a similar purpose for these smaller institutions as they do to multiplexes and mainstream studios: to advertise and provide a product in return for profits. Thus, the status of art house theaters and other independent venues becomes a less stable designation, similar to the function of indie films within the larger context of film distribution. As such, it's important to understand how art house theaters function on both local and national levels. In order to do so, examining the ways these theaters present themselves and their institutional identity in various documents, as well as looking at how they work with other groups (film

distributors, other local organizations, and so on) is necessary. With these things in mind, it can be easier to see who exactly art houses are trying to appeal to, and how this may or may not be specific to the local community that they are a part of, as well as a national community of art houses.

CINEMA IDENTITY

Since the initial art house boom in the mid-20th century, independent theaters have sought to create specific identities for their organizations as ways to distinguish themselves from mainstream multiplexes. As a part of an appeal to indie sensibilities, art house theaters have historically advertised and distributed materials that help cultivate certain kinds of high-culture identities. More specifically, marketing materials help illustrate how art house organizations strive to associate themselves with appeals of status and prestige that oftentimes came along with the kinds of films that were being shown (Willinksy 120). Consistently throughout their existence, from the 1950s with the influx of European art film or in the 1980s with new underground titles coming out of Sundance, art house identity has relied on the various alternative statuses of its products to stake a claim in an oppositional film culture.

For AFS Cinema (and AFS more broadly), institutional identity relies not only on the titles that they show, but also on Austin's long-time status as a city that sat comfortably outside of the mainstream American film culture. Since the success of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), it was known that Austin was a place with a small film culture producing a regional cinema with national appeal, but at the same time it was

still understood that Hollywood was the ideal place to be for anyone who wanted to get into the business of filmmaking (Macor 2). This, along with the eventual success of *Slacker* at the Sundance Film Festival in 1991 and in its post-festival run projected an image of Austin to the country as a weird, laid-back, yet lively city. Similarly, some of the biggest indie stars of the 1990s, including Linklater, Robert Rodriguez, and Mike Judge were all well-known locals of this blooming regional film scene. Especially since Linklater initially operated AFS in a way that reflected this kind of lifestyle, it makes sense that, going forward, AFS would hold on to this identity as an indie institution, even as it became larger and more "official" with its non-profit status and its contribution to kickstarting the film production culture that Austin is now known for. Despite any growth or (inter)national reputation that it garnered, AFS Cinema seemingly has kept its focus in a more local context, perhaps as a way to elevate its community more generally to that same level.

Under an old black and white photo from 1985 of Richard Linklater standing next to Lee Daniel and his brother Bill holding up film projectors, the following excerpt can be read on the "Our Story" page of Austin Film Society's website:

> The AFS Cinema is an ambitiously programmed repertory and first run arthouse with broad community engagement. By hosting premieres, local and international industry events, and the Texas Film Awards, AFS shines the national spotlight on Texas filmmakers while connecting Austin and Texas to the wider film community. ("Our Story")

These two sentences highlight the main goals of AFS as it pertains to their cinema, as well as their historical involvement in creating and hosting events that have come to define and promote Austin's film community in a local and national setting. In doing so, however, they seem to indicate a move away from a more focused approach to local exhibition in favor of one that also gives attention to its larger status in the United States. This perspective frames what they are doing as something that takes into account Austin's film community as a part of a wider ecosystem of filmmakers and film lovers, yet still rooted in a concrete history that sits firmly within the city itself.

In regard to the "broad community engagement" that is mentioned in the sentence describing AFS Cinema, several questions can be asked of this relatively general statement. The first is what exactly this kind of community engagement actually looks like. As an art house theater, it's understood that the cinema appeals to people who have "self-identified that they're interested in... non-commercial cinema," but attempting to reach beyond that audience into the city's larger network of nonprofit organizations is also a point of focus for AFS Cinema (Herrick). Largely, AFS Cinema's community engagement takes shape in the form of co-hosted and co-sponsored events with different groups within the city as a way to reach communities and individuals that may not consider themselves to be a part of this film community, but are still welcomed. For example, they may show films in partnership with departments at UT Austin, or with groups that offer outreach programs to minority communities.

In order to convey this appeal to a diverse set of audience beyond event partnerships, though, AFS Cinema aims to make programmatic interventions that hope to

make underserved people aware that the cinema space is for them as much as it is for those who align themselves with art house sensibilities (Herrick). Ultimately, the role of community engagement that the staff of AFS Cinema envisions is that which appears as inviting to as many people as possible, while still maintaining some sense of what an art house theater might be more generally.

AFS Cinema (and AFS more broadly) remains central to Austin's local network of film organizations, as well as other non-media related organizations on the city, state, and national level. Being ingrained in this network in this way, while still being structurally opposed to mainstream theatres, brings to question the degree to which AFS Cinema's status as an indie or independent theater comes into play. Without getting too technical about what is or is not "indie," it's worth exploring the ways in which partnerships such as these might influence the ways in which these institutions orient themselves within this network.

In regard to AFS/AFS Cinema's ability to connect Austin and Texas to the larger film community, the primary way of doing so is through the Texas Film Awards, held annually at Austin Studios. Considered to be the biggest event in Texas film, the Texas Film Awards is an event where attendees celebrate the achievements of Texas filmmakers old and new, and individuals are inducted into the Texas Film Hall of Fame ("Texas Film Awards"). Looking at an advertisement for the 2020 ceremony, there's an inclusion of notable actors (Renée Zellweger and Timothée Chalamet) and directors (Paul Thomas Anderson and Guillermo del Toro) among Texas-based filmmakers who have received funding from AFS (Augustine Frizzell and Yen Tan) and other people historically

involved with AFS (Richard Linklater and Louis Black) ("Save The Date"). This video, which is shown in the theater before every screening leading up to the event, very clearly illustrates the status of AFS within a larger (inter)national film culture, giving the impression that audience members are at the very least within reach of being a part of this larger network of film lovers and famous filmmakers. However, this is merely an impression because of the actual accessibility of this particular event, which charges up to $25,000 for a 10-seat table at the gala ("Tickets & Info").

This kind of pricing, as well as others that will be discussed later, demonstrates a somewhat conditional nature of this connection between Austin's film community and larger, national film industry networks. Though this advertisement, and with it the idea that audiences are situated in this larger context, is shown to nearly everyone who comes through the theater's doors, only a small portion of patrons would actually be able to participate in this kind of event. While there is an after-party that is more accessible to the public with ticket prices costing around $25 each, the fact that there is a clear separation between affluent and average patrons reinforces an exclusivity to these industry and fundraising-centered events. So, while AFS Cinema is certainly involved in both local and national networks of film culture, the extent to which that involvement in events such as the Texas Film Awards extends to average audiences themselves is more limited. While the theater space itself is certainly *more* inclusive of average moviegoers of various identities, the idea that the organization itself is bringing those individuals closer to this network is purely for the sake of maintaining the theater's identity.

ENTERING THE MOVIE THEATER

Of course, one of the most drastic changes to AFS Cinema from the 1980s to the 2010s is the theater space that is used to actually show the films. In the time since Linklater was screening films in the attic of Captain Quakenbush's Intergalactic Cafe, the Austin Film Society spent a good amount of time without a singular venue where they showed films, moving between the Paramount Theater in downtown Austin, Alamo Drafthouse locations, a building owned by Austin Community College, and some screenings at their production space, Austin Studios (Nafus, Patoski 197, Whittaker). Their acquisition of the Marchesa Hall & Theater in 2016 marked an important moment in which AFS Cinema's identity could materialize in a consistent physical space and offer amenities that they saw as most important for their idea of filmgoing.

Compared to a trip to a multiplex owned by a chain company, going to see a movie at an art house theater is typically understood as a kind of elevated experience, either because of their outward understanding of the importance of cinema as an art or by how one experiences the cinema space itself. Haidee Wasson notes that, for scholars, "cinema does not primarily happen on a celluloid strip, in front of a camera, or in a film can, but in a room articulated to a screen" (vi). The movie theater serves as a space where social rituals surrounding the act of moviegoing play out among individuals, but the theaters themselves become unique spaces based on what kinds of films and experiences they want people to have when they enter into the space.

Aside from the films that these kinds of theaters show, specialty theaters understood that they needed to create an atmosphere and offer things that would appeal to

the upscale and distinguished clientele that they were trying to attract. As such, the decor and amenities they provided to their audiences attempted to contextualize moviegoing alongside other activities associated with upper-class lifestyles. Going back to the 1920s with little theaters, for example, independent theaters would oftentimes house art collections for visitors to look at before or after their shows, as well as provide cafe-like spaces where patrons could order coffee and small foods such as cookies or pastries instead of typical "low-class" food like popcorn and candy (Willinsky 112, 113). Indie theater owners wanted their patrons to feel as if they were experiencing something out of the ordinary, at least by American standards, and that what they were doing was, in some sense, special or unavailable to the average person. Not only this, but they had hoped that in creating theater spaces where people congregated instead of simply moved through in order to get to the auditorium, they would be able to meet and mingle with others who presumably shared their same interest in alternative, intellectually engaging films.

AFS Cinema's location at the Marchesa Hall and Theater seems to aim for similar goals in creating an atmosphere that appeals to both the distinguished art house viewer, as well as the hip and alternative crowd that a city like Austin would presumably house. The cinema has a spacious lobby with modular couches and chairs taking up a good portion of the room, as well as a full-service bar that serves local beer, wine, and original cocktails named after films and filmmakers (which can be brought into the theater when a film starts), along with a more regular concessions counter where one can purchase tickets and more normal concessions such as popcorn, soda, and candy. It is also decorated primarily with large, foreign movie posters, from Linklater's personal collection, of well-known

films, including Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), Krzysztof Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Love* (1988), and Robert Bresson's *Mouchete* (1967) (see figs. 3.1 and 3.2). During a typical visit, the space is relatively quiet, with friends chatting at the bar or sitting on one of the couches as they wait for their movie to start, but the space also doubles as the location for AFS Cinema's quarterly member mixers where members are invited to meet each other and share their love of cinema, as well as AFS (see fig. 3.3.).

Fig. 3.1 Foreign movie posters near theater entrance.; Raney, Nicole. "Sneak Peek Inside Austin's New Art House Movie Theater Before It Opens." *CultureMap Austin*, 23 May 2017, austin.culturemap.com/news/entertainment/05-23-17-austin-film-society-afs-cinema-richard-linklater-first-look/#slide=3.

Fig 3.2 Photo of the bar in AFS Cinema's lobby.; Raney, Nicole. "Sneak Peek Inside Austin's New Art House Movie Theater Before It Opens." *CultureMap Austin*, 23 May 2017, austin.culturemap.com/news/entertainment/05-23-17-austin-film-society-afs-cinema-richard-linklater-first-look/#slide=3.

Fig 3.3 AFS Cinema's lobby during a quarterly member mixer.; "AFS Cinema." *Austin Film Society*, www.austinfilm.org/afs-cinema/.

AFS Cinema's lobby decor, with its focus on presenting artful movie posters for European films, seemingly doubles as both a reinforcement of a kind of art house cannon in featuring well-known titles from famous international directors and as a kind of art gallery. In doing both of these things, the idea of cinema, as well as the objects that are involved in the act of moviegoing, as a kind of art form rather than entertainment or a commodity, is reinforced. With the exception of two posters near the theater entrance, none of the posters in the AFS Cinema lobby are expressly used to advertise their screenings but rather build an atmosphere based on an artistic, European aesthetic instead of a purely consumerist, utilitarian, and American one (though there are some American posters on display, but they are in the minority). Visitors, thus, are encouraged to look at these posters not in their functional context, but as pieces of art that are appreciated based on their own design and merit, while also recognizing the films that they depict and rewarding patrons for their film knowledge, should they recognize the translated film titles along with the directors' names.

Not only this, but the posters, in being drawn directly from Linklater's personal collection of film work as a subtle, potentially unknown, reminder of his presence and influence as the founder of AFS. Though he is relatively hands-off with the organization as of writing this, his personal taste in film remains a part of the space as the original programmer, and in a sense tastemaker, for the people who went to those first screenings (Nilsen, Personal Interview). Implicitly, then, the decor speaks not only to a set of important (personally or more generally) films in the history of cinema, but also the

history of AFS itself by including these pieces curated by Linklater himself, despite the fact that his curatorial duties with the theater have all but ended.

In a natural continuation of the social space of AFS's original attic space, AFS Cinema's lobby is certainly meant to be more than a transition space between the outside world and the cinema itself. Rather, it offers patrons amenities and space that suggest interaction with one another, allowing them to potentially meet and create relationships with people that they may not have otherwise. The lobby becomes a space in which individuals are able to share their cultural knowledge and relate to one another based on the cultural and social capital that they have. This not only frames moviegoing in a more participatory and social context, but reinforces the fact that, in going to AFS Cinema, one is a part of a lively filmgoing community made up of individuals with unique shared tastes and interests, instead of a mass of people filing into a theater to watch a movie and leave, as is oftentimes considered the case with mainstream film audiences. This is most evident when AFS hosts its quarterly member mixer, where AFS Cinema members of all kinds are invited to the theater to meet each other and bond over their love of cinema as an individual *and* a member of this specific community made up of people who are supporting AFS Cinema, financially or otherwise. This also serves as an opportunity for individuals to meet and talk with people who are more directly involved in the operation of the theater, from programmers to other staff members, and offer input on their experiences with the cinema. Whether or not this kind of socialization is available for average moviegoers, ones that might not be a part of the cinema's membership program,

is more difficult to assess, but it seems that this interaction is more easily available to members than non-members.

Finally, the theater space itself also serves as a place for moviegoers to not only watch the films, but have points of contact and interaction with people from local, national, and international film contexts. AFS Cinema's two moderately-sized theaters (268 and 158 seats in the large and small house, respectively), are laid out with a slight stadium-style seating arrangement with stages below the screen that are used for film introductions from various people (programmers, other staff, and guests) and other events like Q&As with filmmakers, actors, and other people in the industry (Herrick). In serving as a point of contact between the average moviegoer and people directly involved in AFS Cinema and filmmaking cultures, the theater becomes a space of consumption and connection, as moviegoers are not only seeing films, but engaging with the people who make both make the films that they see as well as the people who make the screenings happen.

While events such as Q&As and other talks from prominent filmmakers build on the tradition of Linklater's early screenings where he would bring in filmmakers to talk with his audiences, the kinds of people that are actually brought in differ slightly in both their status as well as how the audiences are actually able to interact with them. In the months before its closing in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, AFS Cinema hosted events with a variety of filmmakers along with screenings of their films, including Susan Seidelman (*Smithereens* [1982]), Don Hertzfeldt (*Rejected* [2000] and other shorts), as well as Agnieszka Holland (*Europa Europa* [1990]), some in partnership with

other groups such as UT Austin's RTF department and the Austin Jewish Film Festival. Even in these three examples, one can get a sense of the desire for AFS Cinema to bring in directors from different contexts, from local filmmakers with established cult followings (Hertzfeldt), American indie directors who would also make more popular film (Seidelman), as well as directors with international acclaim and a kind of "art house" reputation (Holland).

The ability of AFS Cinema to host filmmakers of these different kinds signifies its status as a well-known and respectable theater and, at the same time, continues to give average audiences access to these people that they likely would not meet otherwise in a venue where they can easily share their love for films and the people who make them. On the other hand, the difference between these kinds of events and the kinds that Linklater was putting on in the beginning days of AFS do indicate a shift away from a more strongly participatory social film environment to one that creates a strong distinction between average audience and famous filmmaker. Instead of an open dialogue with filmmakers and audience members, discussions such as these are often guided by a host (someone within AFS or another organization) with some questions from the audience. In some sense, this reinforces a kind of exclusive art house star system where people are given glimpses into the minds of these creatives while celebrating their work. Thus, the actual theater space itself serves as a place where people not only view film, but engage in a kind of social interaction with people in the industry in a way that allows people access to art house/international film celebrities, but keeps them at a distance that wasn't there in the organization's early days because of either the amount of people that try to

engage with them after the show, or because guests might not be around or be otherwise inaccessible afterward.

AFS Cinema's physical space, then, represents the kind of growth that the organization has undergone in the last 20 years. While the cinema itself presents itself as a place for people to socialize around film, something Linklater seemed very interested in when starting his screenings, it does so in a way that reinforces ideas of cinema as a high-class activity via associations in its decor and atmosphere with art instead of entertainment. While the space itself is used as a place for people to come together over their shared love of cinema, as Linklater intended in the 80s, the upscale nature of the cinema seems to appeal to a distinguished audience with a refined taste in cinema. Such an audience, while certainly not homogenous in nature, is also seemingly favored and appealed to in other facets of the organization.

MEMBERSHIP PROGRAMS

One of the ways in which art house theaters have cultivated particular kinds of audiences and loyal patrons throughout their existence is through the use of membership programs that people can purchase for various benefits at the theater. Initially used as a way for little theaters to, in a way, pre-sell seats to films that theaters feared would not attract audiences and thus make them financially unviable endeavors, theater subscription and membership plans allowed indie theaters to offer benefits to patrons while securing funds upfront instead of at the box office (Willinsky 52, 57). However, while this was a good method for indie theaters with riskier programming choices to have some extra

income, it also became a way for them to attract a more elite clientele by distinguishing their offerings as more exclusive shows and offering benefits to them that weren't available to the general public. Some of these benefits would include, but were not limited to, discounted ticket prices, early access to seats, and the ability to skip the line for ticket purchases (Willinsky 57). Membership and subscriptions models such as these proved to be beneficial for these theaters not only financially, but also in that they were able to position themselves as something *better* or more substantive than regular movie theaters because they were able to attract a kind of exclusive audience.

Currently, art houses across the United States typically operate in a similar way, offering different kinds of memberships to patrons in exchange for various benefits. Recalling all of the independent theaters I personally have been to, there isn't a single one that I can say did not have some kind of membership program, perhaps because most of these theaters operated as non-profits. By the 1980s, venues in New York City that played art films had moved almost exclusively to operating as nonprofit organizations as profit-based models of exhibition began to be absorbed into museums and educational establishments, a trend which has certainly continued into the 2000s and 2010s (Gomery 194). As such, art house theaters continue to frame their membership programs as ways to support their missions, programming, and general operation with the allure of exclusive benefits unavailable to the average moviegoer.

For a long while, screenings that Linklater hosted in the attic of Captain Quackenbush's were free for the sake of accessibility and to allow him to share his love of cinema with like-minded peers in his community. However, at a certain point after

gaining nonprofit status and moving on to bigger projects, including funding local productions, the cinema needed to have a source of income in order to support itself, including covering the cost of the film, concessions, and general theater maintenance and operation. Along with this admission cost, though, was the introduction of theater membership, which gave you discounted ticket prices, as well as free admission to some summer screenings at the Paramount Theater (Nafus). Since then, membership at AFS Cinema has become a multi-tiered system that designates members as different kinds of film lovers.

The table (3.1) below includes the different levels of membership that AFS Cinema offers as of January 2021, along with their annual cost and list of benefits that the respective levels offer for people who purchase that level of membership. It should be noted that previously, they offered a "Learn" membership for students of UT Austin, Austin Community College, and other schools in the city free of charge that would grant students a free ticket to Signature Screenings as well as discounts on other screenings similar to the "Love" membership. However, that membership tier has been discontinued for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic, but will be reinstated when the physical theater eventually reopens. Similarly, Chart 3.2 below includes the titles, annual cost, and details of four other AFS Cinema membership levels that make up their "inner circle" memberships.

Membership Level	Annual Price	Benefits
"Watch"	$65	- Pre-Sale windows & Discounts on Red Carpet Premieres - Discounts on Classes & Merch - Invites to Member Mixers & Discussion Club - Sneak Previews of New Releases - Free Member Monday Screenings - Discounted Tickets to Moviemaker Dialogues - 2 Passes to Signature Screenings - $3 Discount on Signature Programs
"Make"	$85	- Pre-Sale windows & Discounts on Red Carpet Premieres - Discounts on Classes & Merch - Invites to Member Mixers & Discussion Club - Sneak Previews of New Releases - Free Member Monday Screenings - Free Tickets to Moviemaker Dialogues - 2 Passes to Signature Screenings - $3 Discount on Signature Programs - Invites to Works-In-Progress Screenings
"Love"	$240 (Single), $360 (Dual)	- Pre-Sale windows & Discounts on Red Carpet Premieres - Discounts on Classes & Merch - Invites to Member Mixers & Discussion Club - Sneak Previews of New Releases - Free Member Monday Screenings - Free Tickets to Moviemaker Dialogues - 2 Passes to Signature Screenings - 1 Free Ticket Per Signature Program Screening (2 if Dual) - Invites to Works-In-Progress Screenings - 10% Rental Discount at AFS Cinema & Austin Public
"Premiere"	$780 (Single), $1,380 (Dual)	- Pre-Sale windows & Discounts on Red Carpet Premieres with special pricing - Discounts on Classes & Merch - Invites to Member Mixers & Discussion Club - Sneak Previews of New Releases - Free Member Monday Screenings - Free Tickets to Moviemaker Dialogues - 2 Passes to Signature Screenings - 1 Free Ticket Per Signature Program Screening (2 if Dual) - Invites to Works-In-Progress Screenings - 16% Rental Discount at AFS Cinema & Austin Public - 2 New Release Passes Monthly (4 if Dual) - Invites to Exclusive Special Events

Table 3.1 Austin Film Society Membership Tiers, Prices, and Benefits Source: "Become an AFS Member." Austin Film Society, www.austinfilm.org/join-or-renew/#benefits.

Inner Circle Membership Level	Annual Price	Description
Director's Circle	$2,500	Support the AFS mission! Director's Circle donors receive invitations to special events in addition to other Inner Circle benefits.
Producer's Circle	$5,000	Ensure Austin remains a film capital! Producer's Circle donors receive invitations to private events with filmmakers and special recognition opportunities such as a dedicated seat at the AFS Cinema.
Leadership Circle	$10,000	YOU. LOVE. FILM. Leadership Circle donors gain more access to our exclusive events and are able to take their involvement to the next level by sponsoring a series at the AFS Cinema.
AFS Founder's Circle	$25,000	You resonate with AFS Founder and Artistic Director, Richard Linklater, and are deeply committed to the importance of Texas filmmaking. Founder's Circle donors enjoy the highest level of involvement and are permanently recognized for their support on the AFS Cinema donor wall.

Table 3.2 Austin Film Society Inner Circle Membership Tiers, Prices, and Benefits
Source: "Join the Inner Circle." Austin Film Society, www.austinfilm.org/become-a-member/inner-circle/.

Considering the ways in which art house membership and subscription services have been deployed in order to give institutions a feeling of high-class exclusivity compared to mainstream theaters based along economic class lines, it is clear that AFS Cinema follows this tradition (Wilinsky 108). However, what makes these membership tiers more distinct than a simple difference between member and non-member is how members are seemingly ranked based on how much money they contribute to AFS Cinema. These different levels of financial support correspond to certain titles that also create hierarchies concerned with how devoted an individual is to the act of moviegoing, as well as the creation and sustenance of Austin's film community.

Looking at the membership levels that are more so geared towards the public (Table 3.2), titles serve as indications of how active someone is within the organization based on the simple act of going to the movies. Moving up the pricing scale, membership titles move from more passive actions, such as "watch," to more active ones, such as "make" or "love" (and "premiere" being a more vague term). It should be noted that "Make, Watch, Love" has more or less acted as a catchphrase for AFS as a way to show the various degrees to which AFS can appeal to individuals interested in different areas of film, particularly after they moved into film production on top of exhibition. However, this still begs the question of what it means to simply be someone who watches movies, rather than someone who makes or loves them within a hierarchical membership system such as this. Instead of sitting passively and consuming films, making or loving films assumes an individual who takes charge in their relationship with film, behaving more autonomously by either making something of their own creative vision or more intentionally seeking out films and creating a more individualized taste in it. In a way, the benefits seem to help with maintaining these active roles, given that the Make and Love memberships offer access to work-in-progress screenings, which likely appeal to people who want to offer insight on the process of making a film, and in the case of the Love membership, free tickets to all films that are a part of AFS Cinema's signature programming (which is a majority of their repertory screenings). By comparison, the Watch membership simply provides a discount for people who enjoy films, but maybe don't go to the theater as frequently as other people for whatever reason. Compared to other art house membership programs, which mainly focus on indicators like relationship

status (single/dual) or age (student/adult/senior) for non-donor memberships, AFS Cinema's membership levels focus on what members *do*, and creates a value system based not only on economic lines, but also on social lines ("Pickford Film Membership," "Anthology Film Archives: Support").

On top of the more normal membership levels, AFS Cinema's "Inner Circle" memberships continue this trend of economic and social markers as signifiers for cinematic involvement. Aside from the fact that being a part of an "inner circle" explicitly connotes membership within a small, important, and tight-knit group of people, the titles for these membership levels, in using roles that would be a part of a film crew, imply a sense of making things happen for AFS Cinema via these larger donations. Unlike individuals who purchase lower-level memberships, those that are a part of the "inner circle" are able to offer economic capital that quite literally will keep AFS Cinema running with significant funds that come in outside of ticket sales. They "ensure Austin remains a film capitol," "support the AFS mission," and even "resonate with AFS Founder and Artistic Director Richard Linklater," suggesting that the reputation of AFS Cinema, AFS more generally, and the entire city of Austin as a cultural destination is dependent upon wealthy donors, rather than the people who simply "watch" or "love" film, or even the people who aren't able to purchase a membership ("Join the Inner Circle"). Thus, those with the most economic capital are able to exchange it for access to exclusive events and benefits, ensuring the maintenance of both their own social or symbolic capital and that of Austin's film community more generally. This isn't to say that AFS and AFS Cinema *don't* place any importance on the average moviegoer in this

system, but the systems, programs, and grants that they strive to maintain rely on these donors more heavily, and thus are given more importance so that they may continue to simply exist.

While memberships do provide a significant and important source of income for art houses that aren't tied to box office income or other kinds of sales, namely concessions, the ways in which they have been designated by AFS Cinema indicate a need to appeal to certain people in order to be successful. The implications of valuing, through increasingly exclusive benefits, larger donors over average moviegoers demonstrate the stark differences between how AFS Cinema currently operates versus how it did initially. Where audiences were once simply an audience, there now exists a hierarchy amongst audience members, whether that's felt or not, in the eyes of the organization, indicating a sense of importance and influence within the film community that did not exist before this point. While this isn't to say that membership should be abolished altogether for the sake of flattening these hierarchies, as that would ignore the financial reality of many art houses and the necessity of these sources of income, the way membership is figured into the ways that audience groups, and film communities more generally, are envisioned seems to contradict the idea of a unified community of film lovers. Even though grants are given to filmmakers regardless of their association or membership status with AFS, the ways in which audiences are demarcated based on financial contribution, and how these contributions correspond to more or less direct involvement in certain events, points to the ways in which AFS Cinema envisions members of the (or perhaps *their*) Austin film community

PROGRAMMING

Despite, or perhaps more appropriately in contrast to this kind of hierarchical system of audience membership, the philosophies that AFS Cinema's programming director, Lars Nilsen, holds in regard to who is desired for a filmgoing audience suggest a more pointed and intentional strategy to attract a community of filmgoers. For Nilsen, the idea of programming for an "art house audience" isn't necessarily something that he's interested in; rather he sees it as an opportunity to bring international cinema to Austin with an Austin accent (Nilsen, Personal Interview). In doing so, AFS Cinema's programming reflects a desire to highlight the international and the local, much like Linklater set out to do initially, as a way to appeal to an audience that is perceived as unique to Austin itself. AFS Cinema's programming, thus, reflects a practice of a kind of broad programming with a local, and intentional, audience in mind as a strategy of attracting a relatively diverse audience of film lovers.

For some, programming is seen as a defining element of a theater's identity, as the kinds of films exhibited oftentimes reflect the founders' or owners' interests and values through the kinds of stories that they deem as important enough to show. Not only this, programming at specific theaters also has the potential to change the reception and understanding of films based on the date it's being shown, the place, and the other films that are shown alongside it either immediately or more broadly (across weeks or months) (Bosma 2). As a result, American independent and art house theaters, in order to live up to a more general understanding of the kinds of films those venues show, tend to show a

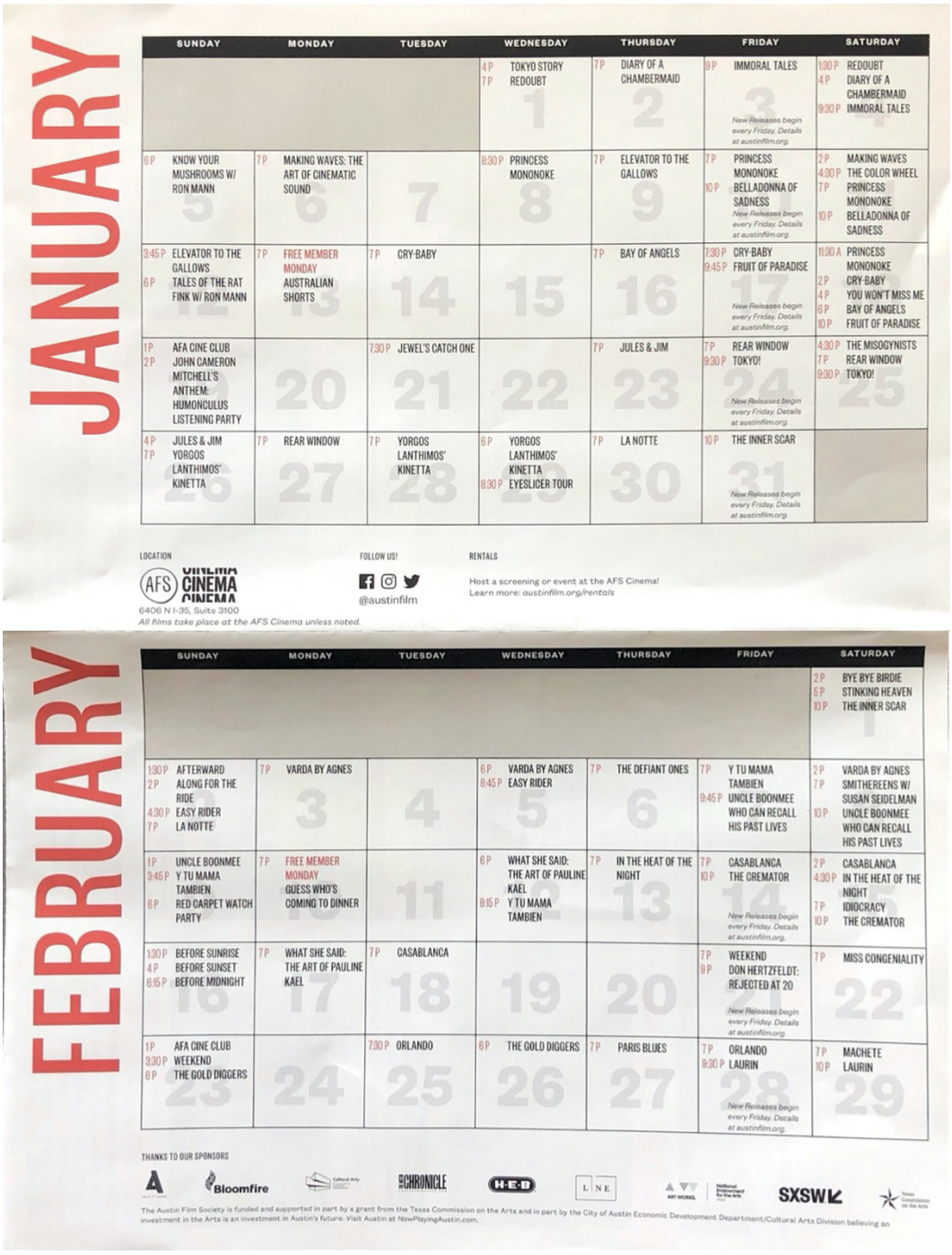
lot of the same foreign and independent films that differentiate themselves from the mainstream alongside series and individual screenings that are more unique to a given theater.

Another important aspect of film programming, however, is orienting the programming toward the audience that a theater has built and what they typically come out to see, as well as choosing ones that can attract and build upon that audience. One typical approach requires a kind of "broad programming" that covers a reasonable amount of ground in the range of films shown while "succeeding in avoiding the impersonal anonymity [of mainstream programming methods] by creating a sense of community for the various types of film lovers" (de Valck 107). In this way, a theater is able to provide a diverse offering of films that can appeal to a variety of viewers while still keeping within a more general idea of what kinds of films they actually want (or in some cases have) to show. Ultimately, this comes down to a question of how to both attract an audience and intensify their attraction to what is being offered by both the films themselves combined with the specific experience of moviegoing as a whole (Bosma 62).

In the case of AFS Cinema, this kind of work for building and maintaining a loyal filmgoing community that is more closely tied to Austin's film community reflects a desire to blur the line between what might be understood as a typical art house (a term that programmer Lars Nilsen is hesitant to use when describing AFS Cinema) and more unique offerings that challenge the typical institutional identity (Nilsen, Personal Interview). According to Nilsen, an art house theater is one that plays first-run films from

companies such as Sony Pictures Classics or Fox Searchlight (among other prestige or indie divisions of larger film production and distribution companies) and primarily plays films that are geared towards an older and whiter audience (Nilsen, Personal Interview). Working against this notion, to a certain degree, AFS Cinema's programming is chosen and organized in a way that is attempting to build culture, both specific to film and more generally, that reflects a desire to be a part of an international and local network of film culture that is hopefully younger, less white, and more female, at least according to Nilsen.

With the slate of films that AFS Cinema had programmed in January through March of 2020, this interest in appealing to a diverse audience (perhaps more so based on taste than identificatory features) interested in both international and local film, as well as AFS Cinema's direct involvement in other national film events, becomes apparent. Looking at the films that AFS Cinema screened during this time (Fig. 3.4), there are several different kinds of individual screenings, as well as ones that are a part of specific series and other programming blocks, that indicate a desire to reach a broader cinephilic audience while also appealing to a more specific kind of Austin audience. Such an audience would likely be one that is perhaps younger, and more interested in subversive films on top of more predictable, but still appreciated, international titles.



JANUARY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			4 P TOKYO STORY 7 P REDOUBT 1	7 P DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID 2	9 P IMMORAL TALES 3 *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.*	1:30 P REDOUBT 4 P DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID 9:30 P IMMORAL TALES 4
6 P KNOW YOUR MUSHROOMS W/ RON MANN 5	7 P MAKING WAVES: THE ART OF CINEMATIC SOUND 6	7 7	8:30 P PRINCESS MONONOKE 8	7 P ELEVATOR TO THE GALLOWS 9	7 P PRINCESS MONONOKE 10 P BELLADONNA OF SADNESS *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.*	2 P MAKING WAVES 4:30 P THE COLOR WHEEL 7 P PRINCESS MONONOKE 10 P BELLADONNA OF SADNESS 11
3:45 P ELEVATOR TO THE GALLOWS 6 P TALES OF THE RAT FINK W/ RON MANN 12	7 P FREE MEMBER MONDAY AUSTRALIAN SHORTS 13	7 P CRY-BABY 14	15	7 P BAY OF ANGELS 16	7:30 P CRY-BABY 9:45 P FRUIT OF PARADISE 17 *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.*	11:30 A PRINCESS MONONOKE 2 P CRY-BABY 4 P YOU WON'T MISS ME 6 P BAY OF ANGELS 10 P FRUIT OF PARADISE 18
1 P AFA CINE CLUB 2 P JOHN CAMERON MITCHELL'S ANTHEM: HUMONCULUS LISTENING PARTY 19	20	7:30 P JEWEL'S CATCH ONE 21	22	7 P JULES & JIM 23	7 P REAR WINDOW 9:30 P TOKYO! 24 *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.*	4:30 P THE MISOGYNISTS 7 P REAR WINDOW 9:30 P TOKYO! 25
4 P JULES & JIM 7 P YORGOS LANTHIMOS' KINETTA 26	7 P REAR WINDOW 27	7 P YORGOS LANTHIMOS' KINETTA 28	6 P YORGOS LANTHIMOS' KINETTA 8:30 P EYESLICER TOUR 29	7 P LA NOTTE 30	10 P THE INNER SCAR 31 *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.*	

LOCATION
AFS CINEMA
6406 N I-35, Suite 3100
All films take place at the AFS Cinema unless noted.

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FEBRUARY

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
						2 P BYE BYE BIRDIE 5 P STINKING HEAVEN 10 P THE INNER SCAR 1
1:30 P AFTERWARD 2 P ALONG FOR THE RIDE 4:30 P EASY RIDER 7 P LA NOTTE 2	7 P VARDA BY AGNES 3	4	6 P VARDA BY AGNES 8:45 P EASY RIDER 5	7 P THE DEFIANT ONES 6	7 P Y TU MAMA TAMBIEN 9:45 P UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES	2 P VARDA BY AGNES 7 P SMITHEREENS W/ SUSAN SEIDELMAN 10 P UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES 7
1 P UNCLE BOONMEE 3:45 P Y TU MAMA TAMBIEN 6 P RED CARPET WATCH PARTY 9	7 P FREE MEMBER MONDAY GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER 10	11	6 P WHAT SHE SAID: THE ART OF PAULINE KAEL 8:15 P Y TU MAMA TAMBIEN 12	7 P IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT 13	7 P CASABLANCA 10 P THE CREMATOR *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.* 14	2 P CASABLANCA 4:30 P IN THE HEAT OF THE NIGHT 7 P IDIOCRACY 10 P THE CREMATOR 15
1:30 P BEFORE SUNRISE 4 P BEFORE SUNSET 6:15 P BEFORE MIDNIGHT 16	7 P WHAT SHE SAID: THE ART OF PAULINE KAEL 17	7 P CASABLANCA 18	19	20	7 P WEEKEND 9 P DON HERTZFELDT: REJECTED AT 20 *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.* 21	7 P MISS CONGENIALITY 22
1 P AFA CINE CLUB 3:30 P WEEKEND 6 P THE GOLD DIGGERS 23	24	7:30 P ORLANDO 25	6 P THE GOLD DIGGERS 26	7 P PARIS BLUES 27	7 P ORLANDO 9:30 P LAURIN *New Releases begin every Friday. Details at austinfilm.org.* 28	7 P MACHETE 10 P LAURIN 29

THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS

The Austin Film Society is funded and supported in part by a grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts and in part by the City of Austin Economic Development Department/Cultural Arts Division believing an investment in the Arts is an investment in Austin's future. Visit Austin at NowPlayingAustin.com.

Fig 3.4 AFS Cinema's film schedules for January, February, and March 2020 as mailed out to members (does not reflect all films actually shown); Author's Photos.

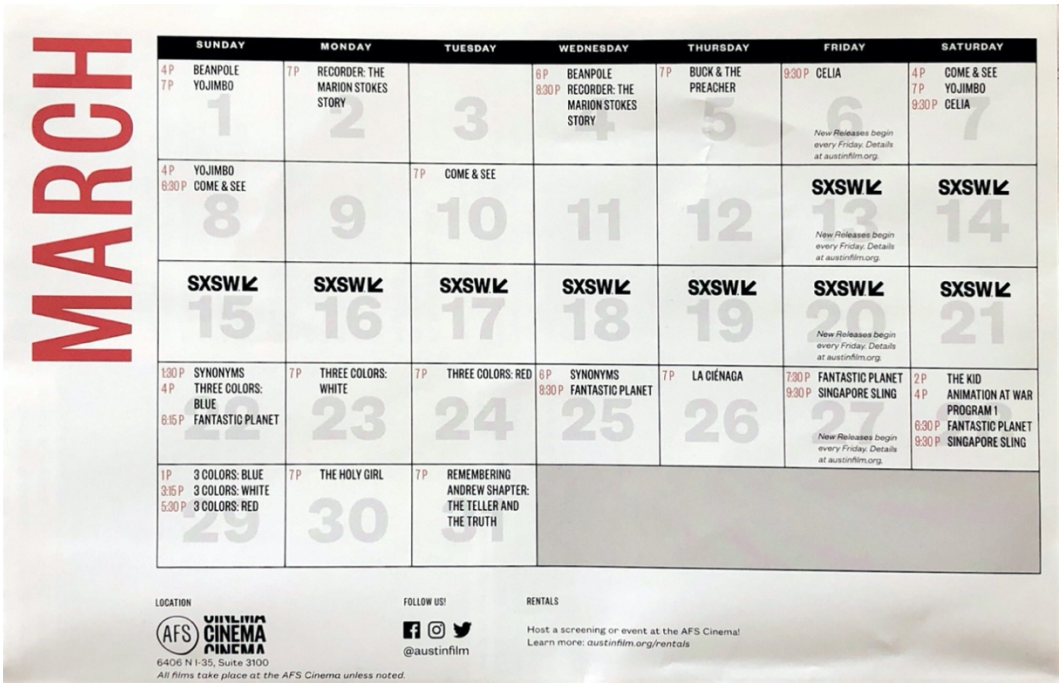

Fig 3.4, cont AFS Cinema's film schedules for January, February, and March 2020 as mailed out to members (does not reflect all films actually shown); Author's Photos.

Four groups of films can be formed from this calendar, including (with some potential overlap):

(1) Foreign/Art House Classics (*Tokyo Story* [1953], *Jules & Jim* [1962], *La Notte* [1961], and *Yojimbo* [1961])

(2) Alternative/Cult Programming, mostly as a part of the theater's Lates program (*Fruit of Paradise* [1970], *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* [2010], *The Cremator* [1969], and *Tokyo!* [2008]),

(3) Films with Local Ties (*Rejected* [2000], *Miss Congeniality* [2000], *Machete* [2010], *The Before Trilogy* [1995, 2004, 2013], and the SXSW block).

(4) New Releases (*Varda by Agnes* [2019], *Beanpole* [2019], *Recorder: The Marion Stokes Story* [2019], and *Synonyms* [2019])

Certainly, the inclusion of films in the Foreign/Art House Classics category is meant to satisfy amore general desire to see what are thought of to be international, great, and canonical films that are a part of a chain of distribution that are oftentimes accompanied by other, more unique, titles to supplement them (Bosma 8). For example, during January, screenings of major works from directors like Francois Truffaut such as *Jules & Jim* are a part of a larger series highlighting the films of actress Jeanne Moreau which included screenings of *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964, dir. Luis Bunuel) and *Bay of Angels* (1963, dir. Jacuqes Demy). These types of screenings work to expose audiences to films in a unique context (compared to a Truffaut or Demy retrospective, for example) that likely wouldn't be shown in other theaters.

Similarly, AFS Cinema's Alternative/Cult Programming works in a way that appeals to audiences who likely are interested in the kind of art house programming that they offer, but also are looking for more unique titles that offer a "counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility" (qtd. Mathijs 90). These can be lesser-known titles from known international directors like Věra Chytilová or Apichatpong Weerasethakul, who arguably occupy a more niche status among other famous international directors, or virtually unknown and obscure films such as *City of Lost Souls* (1983, dir. Rosa von Praunheim). For Nilsen, programming these kinds of alternative, even paracinematic, films is a way to reach an audience that is more uniquely "Austin" that reflects the cool and alternative scene that was perhaps more prevalent in the 1980s and 90s, but is still

around in the present in a different way (Nilsen, Personal Interview). These screenings continue the trend of midnight screenings as places for alternative, controversial, and counter-culture films to be screened, and as such these screenings directly appeal to those interested in those films, as they offer something more distinctive and cutting-edge than AFS Cinema's usual programming.

Even with this mix of programming, however, looking at the number of screenings that each of these types have can give you an idea of what kinds of films are prioritized over others. Largely, AFS Cinema's schedule is taken up by Art House Classics, alternative programming, and new releases, with locally-oriented programming coinciding with important dates and events, such as the 20th anniversary of Austin Studios which was celebrated with screenings of *Miss Congeniality* (2000) and *Machete* (2010), both films which were produced through Austin Studios ("20th Anniversary of Austin Studios"). While this is certainly reflective of the fact that the number of locally-produced films is vastly outnumbered by non-local ones and a programmer wouldn't want to repeatedly program a small number of local films for the sake of doing so, it also serves as a reminder of the role and obligation of art house theaters within larger networks of distribution to present certain "art house" films at certain times corresponding to release schedules. AFS Cinema's status as a singular, independent theater with distinct differences from other similar theaters does not negate the fact that these venues are "less stand-alone outposts for singular film events and more like monitors networked into global entertainment flows" that do have some influence on what is and isn't shown (Wasson vii). AFS Cinema's annual involvement with SXSW

exemplifies this networked status, as this partnership puts a lot of national and local films on AFS Cinema's screens as determined largely by SXSW (Nilsen, "Re: Follow-Up Question").

Balancing this commitment to highlighting local filmmaking and appealing to niche audiences while still remaining a part of these national and international networks of distribution certainly seems to be one of the main challenges for a theater like AFS Cinema in terms of how they are presenting these films. On one hand, according to Nilsen, highlighting local work is a part of AFS Cinema's mission, but if someone were to ask why a well-known film (he cites Jonathan Demme's *Stop Making Sense* (1984) and recent restorations of Wong Kar-wai films) are being shown for another time, the answer is simply that people love to see these films and that seeing these restorations is still exciting for people who love film (Nilsen, Personal Interview). In doing so, AFS Cinema is able to bring in that desired community of local cinephiles, but whether or not that community is exactly the diverse kind that is being targeted by programmers and the theater generally is still somewhat questionable given the fact that they do not gather audience or membership demographic data in order to see if these efforts are working, or if the audiences that are being brought in fall in line with historic trends in art house crowds (Herrick).

CONCLUSION

Over its lifetime, AFS Cinema, as well as AFS as an organization as a whole, have grown to a size that necessitates a different way of operation than was taken in its

formative years. In this difference lies an indication of how the priorities and status of the organization within Austin more generally have shifted from the more authentically independent operation as led by Richard Linklater into one that is a strong and dominant force within Austin's film scene and its culture more generally. What this means in regard to its status as an indie institution, which would perhaps be the case for many indie film institutions, is that with this growth and success came a change in the overall spirit and purpose of the organization. While the mission of bringing global, independent cinema to Austin in a way that Austinites would appreciate most still stands, and is very much so legitimate and successful, the fact of the matter is that at the heart of AFS Cinema lies a need to run a business. Charles Ramírez Berg summarized this change nicely, saying that the AFS board "used to sit around and talk about movies; now [they're] talking about money" because it's something that cannot be avoided in order for AFS Cinema to simply exist and grow (if they want to grow, that is) (qtd. Patoski 207).

Writing on dominant culture, John Clarke et al. are careful to note that "dominant culture of a complex society is never a homogeneous structure," and that "subordinate cultures will not always be in open conflict with it" ("Subcultures, Cultures and Class" 12). Art house theaters and other organizations like AFS Cinema illustrate this phenomenon particularly well given their status within different stratas of culture. Although AFS Cinema does not have to adhere to the same institutional practices as mainstream multiplex cinemas, its ties to both national organizations (The National Endowment for the Arts, for example) for funding, as well as larger, nationally-oriented distributors (Kino Lorber, Janus Films, and so on) for product, illustrate the ways in

which it is in fact a part of, and in some ways reliant on, these networks in order to subsist. Because of this kind of relationship that AFS Cinema has to these other national networks and organizations, its goals and functions become aligned with providing certain products and services that might be considered typical among other art houses while still trying to offer something that is more unique to AFS Cinema's specific brand identity.

As the theater and organization grew out of its DIY roots and had to become more appealing to large organizations in order to receive funding and find sponsorships within the community, the audience that AFS Cinema began to attract would naturally shift away from crowds interested in screenings because of their countercultural value towards dominant film culture to ones that are more broadly interested in seeing films that aren't shown at mainstream theaters. While this isn't to say that one group is potentially more preferable to another for any given reason, what this means for Austin's film community, as imagined by AFS Cinema, is that it is one that is less interested in subversion of exhibitional norms more generally, and more so concerned with a generalized appreciation of film that is aligned more closely with ideas of *upscale* alternative culture. While still very much an alternative or opposition to dominant industrial trends and flows, this opposition "sells to an elite niche market—which makes up in affluence some of what it lacks in size—a viable commercial logic underwrites the independent spirit" (Newman, *Indie* 21).

Where there was once a group of people who were programming films that the University and other venues in the city largely ignored, now there is a theater that

participates in the creation of a canon of Austin film as well as programming art house classics with a slight tinge of local weirdness. Despite this growth of both AFS Cinema and Austin as a whole, a part of this audience still identifies with a more DIY ethos and has been able to act upon that. While AFS Cinema grew, so did new emergent groups with their own ideas of what theaters and other film exhibition venues can, and perhaps *should,* show as a way to celebrate film on a significantly more local, micro scale.

Chapter 4 - Entering the Hyperreal

"You're not hardcore unless you live hardcore"

Dewey Finn, *School of Rock* (2003)

Much like AFS and AFS Cinema, the Austin of the mid-to-late-2010s has experienced a similar kind of growth from a city that was known for being laid-back into one with a steadily rising population, economic growth, and a cultural sector that has gained recognition on a national, and even global scale. With this growth, of course, comes a different feeling within the city itself, as many people who have lived here long enough to witness this change saying that it's a totally different city with a totally different social atmosphere. Where, then, in this city historically known for its independent spirit and love of cultural oddities, might a kind of slacker, DIY spirit still exist? This is especially important to ask when so many of the features (lower rent prices, among other things) that allowed such a culture to bloom in the 80s and 90s have seemingly vanished as neighborhoods have become gentrified and lower-income residents, along with their unique cultural offerings, are pushed further from the city center. The cultural hotspot and iconic features of the city have, at this point, been largely replaced with a "sparking shiny downtown skyline [projecting] a corporate and ritzy vibe—perfect for Gilded Age vulgarians in search of a second or third home" (Patoski 293).

At a time in which this expansion seems to be coming to (as well as going beyond) a saturation point and Austin's cultural institutions are having to adapt to this

change, a small group of film lovers already enmeshed in Austin's larger art scene established a new collective that sought to come together with others around the appreciation of films of all kinds. Founded in 2016 by long-time friends Jenni Kaye, David McMichael, and Tanner Hadfield, Hyperreal Film Club was envisioned as an alternative film collective that sought to present "an eclectic mix of the world's greatest movies [and] build a special community around the moving image" ("About - Hyperreal Film Club"). Expanding on the typical notion of what a movie theater of any kind offers, Hyperreal also aims to create "unique movie-watching experiences in unusual, thoughtful, and immersive pop-up environments" as a way to make audiences think differently about how they engage with the films that they view ("About - Hyperreal Film Club"). They have also garnered praise as a venue with "the most conscientiously diverse, avant-garde, and polarizing films being programmed anywhere in Austin" (Malin). All of this was able to be done without any major sources of funding or pre-existing social capital outside of personal relationships and friends in different parts of the city's professional and amateur art scenes.

Much like how Linklater approached at-home screenings with Chale Nafus and George Morris, Hyperreal's screenings grew out of a simple desire for Jenni, David, and Tanner to watch the movies that they love together, which then grew into a desire to share that kind of comradery with others in a casual setting. While none of the three founders had any kind of significant background in film exhibition prior to Hyperreal's founding, their involvement in local music scenes, including concert promotion and some stage production, influenced their approach to these events (McMichael). At the heart of

it all, their main goal was to pair the art of film and the experience of filmgoing with a specific time and place that allowed for the creation of a community of people who are interested in a variety of films while bringing a more DIY attitude to the whole experience.

At a time in which indie film institutions across the country, from production to exhibition, have arguably become as commodified as their mainstream counterparts, Hyperreal Film Club's goals and practices reflect a newer, perhaps more authentically independent, approach to film exhibition that in some senses returns to the spirit that Linklater had when he established Austin Media Arts. Through their approaches to hosting unique exhibition events, more open and inclusive programming strategies that break from traditional art house and microcinema practices, and internal structuring that fosters direct participation from community members, Hyperreal Film Club reflects an updated alternative film culture within Austin that envisions exhibition as a locus of interpersonal film culture that is open and accessible to a wider audience.

ORIGINS OF THE MICROCINEMA

While the microcinema movement is a relatively new one, precursors to these kinds of exhibitors can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century. As previously discussed, the Little Theater movement, dating back to around 1912, stood as a first instance of a direct alternative to more commercialized theaters by showing films that weren't from major American film distributors (Kashmere 56). Going forward into the latter half of the century, when art houses began to become more widespread throughout

the United States, what began to happen more often was the establishment of film societies and other small screening groups oftentimes directly associated with experimental filmmakers themselves as a way to screen both their own films as well as those from fellow filmmakers. Examples of these groups include Maya Deren's screenings at the Provincetown Playhouse, Cinema 16 (founded by Amos and Marcia Vogel), First Person Cinema (founded by Carla Selby and Gladney Oakley, with later involvement from Bruce Conner and Stan Brakhage), Bruce Baillie's backyard screenings, and Jonas Mekas' Film-makers' Cinematheque, among many other groups taking shape during the mid-1960s (Kashmere 57, 59). These were spaces in which transgressive work could easily be screened for audiences that were interested in such work, and were oftentimes made up of people already a part of the artistic communities that the filmmakers themselves were a part of. As such, groups and societies like these and their approach to screenings would be what set the stage for the microcinema movement to take place more concretely in the late-20th and beginning of the 21st century alongside the popularization of indie theaters in the United States.

As the art house movement of the 20th century came to a decline in the 90s, a majority of remaining theaters transitioned to nonprofit structures (if they weren't already operating on one) with a heavier focus on repertory programming alongside new indie releases since those were the most appealing to their main demographics (Gomery 194). Since this transition, it has been noted that the models on which these theaters were initially created have largely remained the same due to owners and boards of directors who are reluctant to significantly change aspects of these organizations as potential needs

or desires from the community arise as they become increasingly diverse (J. Berg 55). Even when art houses and other larger indie exhibitors do attempt to appeal to minority audiences through different programming, some have found that these kinds of programs tend to not bring in these desired audiences and also don't appeal as widely to regular patrons (J. Berg 60). Generally speaking, then, art houses have largely continued to attract more affluent and predominantly white audiences that are seen as more mature and discerning of what they watch despite any well-meaning efforts to expand on that appeal to untapped markets. Similarly, art houses (and perhaps movie theaters more broadly) have continued to be a "privileged and often idealized site for understanding the specificities of cinema, whether conceived as a mass medium, a popular entertainment, or modernist art" (Wasson, "Introduction" v). Not only this, but the term "art house" itself has become somewhat of a slippery term with the rise of smaller chains like Alamo Drafthouse that have more specific and niche programming that appeals to audiences interested in foreign and independent film, but tend to stick to more safe programming given their goal to remain appealing to a wider audience interested in blockbusters. As a result, this has caused any kind of art house subculture to weaken over the course of the last twenty years, as small films that don't even make it to larger festivals oftentimes have no chance of being seen (Alvin 5).

In response to this institutionalization and commodification of independent and alternative film by larger distributors and other industrial players, the microcinema (as it's currently known) served as a way to reestablish and maintain a subcultural positioning in relation to mainstream moviegoing as a popular leisure activity. While it

may be hard to specifically define microcinemas given the fact that one can look and function much differently than another, these venues are typically very small (usually seating less than 100 people) and are usually run out of community spaces, or even individuals homes. What is at the core of microcinemas, though, is the objective to share films with others in your community often with a direct appeal to what those people want to see. Oftentimes, microcinemas appear in cities with indie theaters that would on rare occasions screen "risky," experimental, and alternative films in specialized blocks or single screenings. However, microcinemas aim to include these types of films in their programming consistently instead of treating them as special event screenings for a small part of their audience (McIlroy 130). In doing so, microcinemas give smaller, unknown films from either local filmmakers or those from underseen corners of film history a chance to be experienced on the big screen (or at least a screen larger than one's television, computer, or phone) without any hesitancy in regard to whether or not the screening will drive a profit, as they usually don't have to pay for screening rights or pay for their screening spaces. Instead, microcinemas tend to focus on creating an environment where audiences are able to develop a passionate interest in film without relying on mainstream marketing, famous actors, or big budgets that are typically used to attract viewers, even in alternative settings like art houses. Microcinemas, then, become an alternative to the alternative cinema itself by offering these kinds of risky programming as well as creating an explicitly social space around film exhibition itself.

Many microcinemas, because of their subcultural or countercultural status, in a sense rely on creating a cinema space that enables them to create a tangible community of

film lovers who share similar ideals in regard to not only taste in film, but even the purpose of it. Microcinema audiences not only like to watch different films than the mainstream offers, but they crave an entirely new cinematic experience (Alvin 5). For many microcinemas, having a sense of community around the screenings they host is an essential aspect in creating such an experience, and so films themselves serve more so as a backdrop to a larger social setting rather than the singular event that people engage with more individually (Alvin 6). Frequently, large portions of audience members stick around to discuss the films, whether it be to understand any kind of deeper meaning or to discuss things *around* the movie such as politics or filmmaking practices. For microcinemas that frequently screen work from local filmmakers, this can also be a chance for local artists to connect and provide feedback on each other's work, as well as "encourage a more direct connection between audience and artist" (de Ville 106). For others that focus on particular demographics within these communities, such as Los Angeles' EZTV which focuses on queer film, video and art, these can become spaces for marginalized groups to find empowerment in promoting their work that would otherwise go unnoticed in dominant media flows. Microcinemas, therefore, create more democratic spaces compared to art houses through encouraging direct participation among audience members and filmmakers alike.

A final feature of microcinemas that is key to their success is their impermanent and transient status. While this is not necessarily applicable to *every* microcinema, many find themselves moving to different, nontraditional, screening venues based on either space availability or other more intentional reasons, or in a less ideal situation closing

altogether. In the latter case, though, the closure of one microcinema in a city will more often than not lead to the creation of a new one, as the audience for them does not go away with the closure of a space (de Ville 129). Microcinemas find their homes in a variety of different spaces, from ones that stand as more typical multi-purpose gathering spaces such as community centers to other, less traditional spaces such as basements, coffee shops and bars, or unconventional outdoors locations. Echo Park Film Center, based in Los Angeles, for example, has a "filmmobile" that travels to different parts of the city and screens films on the sidewalk on the side of the bus (see Fig. 4.1). In Austin, it was once common to find coffee shops or other similar places that

Fig. 4.1 Mobile film screening from Echo Park Film Center's filmmobile.; "Filmmobile." *Echo Park Film Center,* http://www.echoparkfilmcenter.org/blog/filmmobile/

screened films in their shops after hours, such as Spider House Ballroom, located a few blocks north of UT Austin (de Ville 128). These make-shift locations allow for these screenings to take place wherever is possible, rather than a single location that may not be available for groups such as these that either make no money off of their screenings, or make enough to recoup the costs of acquiring some films (if they aren't just showing films off of DVDs, which some would frown upon for its illegality).

The microcinema, then, has become a popular venue for more amateur or non-industry-affiliated individuals who want to be involved in exhibition practices to gain useful experience in the field, and oftentimes can serve as a launching pad for an actual career in film exhibition. It should be noted that Austin Media Arts had a lot of these features while Linklater was in charge of it in the 80s and 90s before it became more ingrained in the city's larger and developing film industry. Similarly, Hyperreal Film Club's programs, screenings, and attitude seem to share many of the same ideas. As briefly mentioned, Hyperreal's screenings operate entirely on a volunteer basis with no money and little equipment needed to make screening happen. More often than not, screenings are entirely free (except for beer that can be bought at screenings as well as a tip jar) and have minimal advertising outside of a single post on their Instagram page that usually excludes the title of whatever they're screening, which gives them some plausible deniability for what they show, but also means people attend them for the experience itself as much as what is actually being shown.

REIMAGINING THEATER SPACE

Much like Linklater's early exhibitions, the screenings that Hyperreal hosts have inhabited a variety of different spaces that happen outside of a more traditional kind of exhibition venue. While this is the result of not having the funds to rent a permanent space, Hyperreal's screenings reflect a more casual approach to exhibition that doesn't prioritize a "proper" theatrical space in order to focus on creating spaces where people are still able to come together around film in more unconventional ways. On top of this, because of this more impermanent, and perhaps modular, nature of these screenings' spaces, certain films are able to be contextualized in more custom, immersive spaces that complement their themes, plot, or other aspects. As such, Hyperreal's screenings space(s) offer unique exhibition experiences that not only DIY in spirit and nature, but can make the experience of film viewing more active, prompting deeper engagement with fellow filmgoers and strengthening the collective identity of Austin film lovers.

As previously noted, a driving goal of art houses historically, as well as in their current operation, has been to provide a more upscale cinematic experience than is typically provided by mainstream movie theaters and multiplexes through both the ambience of the theater itself as well as the contents of their programming (de Ville 108). Microcinemas similarly strive for such an experience in their space, in that they show films and create events that are intrinsically distinct from mainstream counterparts; however, they explicitly reject the upscale and elite nature of the cinema space itself in favor of ones that suit the subcultural identity of the audience that they appeal to. Instead of a broader appeal to groups with perceived higher cultural and economic capital

through decor and certain spatial arrangements, microcinemas can be "understood ultimately as [products] of [their] locality," shifting methods of appeal onto experiences that are more unique to the particular place and the people that inhabit it (Vernetti 9).

Throughout its existence, Hyperreal has moved between several different homes as its main screening venue that have each contributed to different kinds of feelings of intimacy that is rarely, if ever, found in typical screening spaces. Since 2016, they have screened films in backyards, coffee shops, parking lots, and most recently (and most permanently) the Ana Lark Center in East Austin, among other one-off locations. Returning to Bourdieu's conception of how cultural fields determine the reception (as well as production) of certain products, this refusal to maintain a normal screening space points to a desire to change the overall meaning of the films they show by altering their context of consumption. Since, according to Bourdieu, the spaces in which cultural objects (films, paintings, and so on) are consumed determine the ways in which these objects are received by audiences, Hyperreal's willingness to show films of various quality and/or cultural status in any place demonstrates a kind of reclamation of public film viewing at the level of what is or is not an "appropriate viewing context" ("Production of Belief" 278). What matters most to Hyperreal, then, is that there is a space to show them at all, and that that space, along with the films that they show, can create a friendly, welcoming, and fun environment for anyone to be in (McMichael).

The near constantly changing space that microcinemas inhabit stands as a clear example of the ways in which they reject specific ideas of the dedicated theater space in favor of one that suits a particular group's ethos. Looking back at Hyperreal's initial

location, which was simply in a backyard with a makeshift screen and projector, it's clear that this space reflects a more casual experience that feels more so like going over to a friend's house to watch a movie and hang out instead of a more involved (and possibly expensive) night out at a proper theater. This reflects a more personal viewing experience where friends choose exactly what they want to watch because of a common taste or desire to see films instead of preselected titles that are seen as appropriate for the establishment that is presenting them. In reframing this extremely small and often intimate way of viewing films both well-known and underground in a more public context, Hyperreal is firmly within the tradition of microcinemas as exhibition spaces that "provide the requisite aura of countercultural authenticity" to their project (qtd. de Ville 106). From this very humble beginning, this attitude would remain key to future iterations of Hyperreal in other locations, but in ways that allow for more experimentation with the possibilities of exhibition space itself.

After a period of other, impermanent, screening venues, Hyperreal settled more firmly at the Ana Lark Center, which is a community center known for its DIY events for both music and other kinds of art. Located in a more residential area in East Austin, Ana Lark Center's location challenges the standard of where indie theaters tend to be located, which is in suburban or urban spaces, in favor of being located in a place that is more accessible to working-class or non-urban audiences (Wilinsky 95). This space, which is fairly wide and open (see figs. 4.2 and 4.3), has allowed for more creative and original spatial organizations that promote a more dynamic experience for audiences in regard to viewing films and more actively participating in the screenings themselves. Given the

Fig 4.2 (Top) General Photo of the Ana Lark Center (not during a Hyperreal event); Source: https://s3-media0.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/PcgIxg1zHBh1HACcURcZ7A/o.jpg

Fig 4.3 (Bottom) Photo from one of Hyperreal Film Club's screenings at the Ana Lark Center; Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/B8z_e6mFMOO/

openness of the space itself, there is no boundary between a viewing space and a more social space rather than the strict demarcation of these spaces in a traditional theater. Rather, the viewing space *is* the social space, reframing the act of viewing as one that takes place amongst audience members instead of one that prioritizes individual experience with a film within a crowd. Although there are often introductions from programmers or other organizers, these people almost always come from within the audience itself, effectively bridging the gap between those in charge and the audience members themselves. Thus, the idea of a film community, from those creating events and choosing films, to filmmakers, to audience members, are put on the same social level when it comes time to actually watch films, effectively demystifying the idea of a programmer or theater owner as a non-present but influential figure in exhibition.

Another benefit to a space such as the Ana Lark Center is its ability to be more easily transformed into spaces that reflect the films that are being shown. While this may not be a constant addition to screenings because of the increased labor needed to do so, Hyperreal has managed to create immersive spaces that are able to bring a countercultural, and even taboo, spirit to their events. One of the last instances of this before in-person screenings were discontinued was the screening of Evan Purchell's found-footage gay pornographic documentary *Ask Any Buddy* (2020), in which they created and installed a replica of a men's restroom stall, with relevant graffiti and a glory hole to match (see Fig 4.4). This certainly fits into the initial spirit of Hyperreal as a group in that it explicitly creates a unique experience around film viewing. Not only does this create a directly participatory element to the screening as an event, but it puts

Fig 4.4 Photo of filmmaker Evan Purchell (right) and Keegan Shepherd (left) in the pop-up glory hole photo booth at Hyperreal's screening of *Ask Any Buddy*; Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9Sp9DYFePK/

audiences in the space of subcultural or otherwise marginalized groups, in this case gay men, that can provide context or an otherwise different understanding of the film that is being shown.

Immersive experiences such as these also serve a more utilitarian purpose for Hyperreal in a more long-term sense. By setting up experiences around films that perhaps lend themselves to more elaborate decor or features and encouraging people to take

pictures and interact with the space, Hyperreal is able to draw a kind of passive form of publicity. Given that Hyperreal operates on little to no budget, creating spaces that encourage participation and sharing of the experience works to display the kind of charged atmosphere where people are truly excited to be there not only for the movie, but for the social aspect of it as well (McMichael).

Because of this willingness to not only create immersive experiences around the films that they show, as well as be open to making these experiences reflect taboo experiences, Hyperreal demonstrates how social spaces or other positions, such as movie theaters or other similar venues like Hyperreal, are often strongly correlated to the people who inhabit them (Bourdieu 104). Compared to a typical art house theater, which tends to attract a predominantly white and affluent audience, Hyperreal's space implies a more accessible nature of their organization. This happens both through the financial aspect of their screenings, but rarely charging an entrance fee, but also in the way they are organized socially. When initially began, the main idea behind screenings for Hyperreal's founders was that anyone could show up, regardless of whether or not they knew anyone there, and could talk to people purely because they knew everyone was there to have fun watching a movie (McMichael). By organizing theatrical space as a place for people to actually interact without any kind of barrier for entry , potentially within settings that reflect realities of marginalized groups, Hyperreal's events become more appropriate spaces for people who may not otherwise identify with the alternative, yet still dominant, crowds of art house filmgoers. And while there is some overlap between the crowds of AFS and Hyperreal, the more heavily social atmosphere of the latter allows for social

interactions to happen between people that are less likely to occur in other scenarios. In creating a space for people who want to watch a wide variety of films with a lower (or perhaps wider) standard of taste, Hyperreal manages to establish a meeting ground for everyone within this community to meet on a more personal level.

REEVALUATING THE ALTERNATIVE CANON

In comparison to more dominant indie institutions, microcinemas oftentimes show films that are rarely, if ever, shown to typical art house audiences for a variety of reasons. Primarily, this is because these kinds of films, which are oftentimes experimental, controversial, or otherwise less accessible or interesting to general audiences, are highly unlikely to bring in a profit for the theater itself after the cost of rental fees and profit sharing with distributors. Even at the level of art house film distribution, which is a commercial endeavor, the "main strategy is to circulate cultural commodities in the most profitable and efficient way" in order to minimize risks and create maximum revenues (Bosma 34). Because of this, even films that are about more marginalized groups, such as queer cinema or films from other non-normative groups, oftentimes don't push the envelope so much as to actually disrupt dominant understandings of film and culture. Instead, they tend to "mirror the love, romance, thriller, horror, fill-in-the-blank genres sowing at the corner multiplex" to varying degrees as to offer something familiar, yet not mainstream (Berry 63). In some senses, then, despite the mostly viable (yet still very precarious) nature of American art houses today, anxieties seem to remain from their preceding "sure-seater" status.

Microcinemas, in contrast, tend to focus on this kind of non-traditional content, as well as other kinds that are not shown by dominant indie exhibitors because of their unique ability to show films without having to devote nearly as much thought to profit or membership earnings when making programming decisions. This can come down to the possibility that microcinemas will show films without acquiring the rights to do so (as was the case for screenings at Spider House Ballroom which simply played DVDs from the video rental store nextdoor), or because there is little to no regular maintenance of equipment or the space itself (de Ville 128). Because of this freedom to screen what they are simply able to get their hands on, the programming choices that get made by these groups start to become more representative of what they see their audience wanting to see, rather than what films are circulating in distribution networks.

Where Hyperreal Film Club deviates from the more traditional notion of a microcinema, though, is the breadth of films that make up their programming as a whole. While still interested in screening known foreign/non-Hollywood titles, the full variety of films reflects a cinephilic approach to film exhibition and viewing that is more representative of the taste of a more general public in Austin that also stands as an alternative to all other exhibitors in the city, both big and small. By incorporating both mainstream and locally-produced titles into their programming, Hyperreal even reconstitutes what it means to be a cinephile at a time when that term has come to be synonymous with people who tend to watch more obscure films in an attempt to be perceived as more cultured. Instead, their approach to screening is simply to say “these are all movies that we enjoy and would like to share with people who also might like

them," with value placed on a variety of different features (McMichael). There's also simply an element of wanting to show movies that are fun to watch with others. What this ultimately means is that Hyperreal is able to expand upon the type of films that are traditionally considered as a part of the art house canon, making those films, as well as cinephilia as an identity, more accessible to audiences while simultaneously including local work in this expanded canon.

Looking at a selection of films that Hyperreal screened from 2016 to March 2020 (see Table 4.1), it's clear that the programming strategies implemented are very similar to those used by professional programmers, allowing them to show films that highlight actors and filmmakers alike that are nearly always excluded from discussions of "elite"

Mainstream	**Foreign/Art House/Indie**	**Local**
- *Final Destination* (2000) - *National Treasure* (2004) - *Cats* (1998) - "Alt-Disney Pictures" - Jennifer Lopez Series - Fast and the Furious Drive-In Series	- *Fallen Angels* (1995) - John Waters Series - *Fantastic Planet* (1973) - *Under the Skin* (2013) - *The Holy Mountain* (1973) - *Daisies* (1966)	- *Ask Any Buddy* (2020, dir. Evan Purchell) - *o, my aching heart* (2017, dir. Illyana Bocanegra) - *The Minnesota Magic Hour* (2018, dir. Michael Perkins & Jonah Yohana)

Table 4.1 Selection of Films/Series Programmed for Hyperreal Film Club Source: http://www.instagram.com/hyperrealfilmclub

culture. Compared to AFS Cinema, which tends to only show more successful or

mainstream films (*Miss Congeniality* [2000] or *Machete* [2010], for example) if they have a direct connection to local filmmakers and producers and have become successful, Hyperreal's tendency and willingness to screen films such as *The Fast and The Furious* (2001) or *National Treasure* (2004) purely for their content points to a desire to elevate titles often considered pure spectacle or entertainment to a slightly more serious level of film consumption often reserved for more artistic films (this isn't to say, however, that some of the enjoyment of films like these aren't at least partially based in camp). Thus, films can simultaneously be enjoyed as spectacle *and* as possible examples of more serious filmmaking.

This kind of combination of mainstream and art house films reflects a kind of "dialectic curatorial strategy" which relies on a tendency to choose seemingly unrelated films when creating a program of film screenings. Drawing from Sergei Esienstein's theory of montage editing and dialectic montage, which allows film editors to create free associations between images that are placed next to each other, this kind of film curation allows audiences to draw connections between films that might seem drastically different by seeing them in close succession or in a context that they normally wouldn't (Bosma 53). For example, the selection of "Alt-Disney Pictures," made up of American non-Disney animated films, as well as *Fantastic Planet* (1973) can highlight alternative animation practices along with potential thematic linkages (Hyperreal's Instagram page does not state which films are a part of the Alt-Disney night), while watching certain John Waters films as well as films from the *Fast and the Furious* franchise might reveal some unexpected connections dealing with ideas of chosen family in both queer and

straight contexts. While the latter of those two examples may be more of a reach, that combination does demonstrate the potential of this kind of wide programming.

In addition to these two types of screenings, Hyperreal puts consistent effort towards showcasing local film (or other kinds of visual media) on a regular basis. This happens in two ways: (1) the screening local shorts before non-locally made features either as a thematic pairing or to simply show it, and (2) the screening of locally made features as the main show. This consistent inclusion of local work serves as a way for people attending these screenings to remain in-touch with the kind of work that their fellow community members are producing given the fact that Austin produces so many films, but a sizable portion of that work remains unseen in a more proper screening context. For example, no formal theater in Austin was able to screen *Ask Any Buddy* (2020, dir. Evan Purchell) because of various local laws around screening pornography with alcohol being available. However, Hyperreal was able to screen it without concern for its adult content or the possibility of violating any laws, giving the local film community the chance to see this work that came from one of their own. In screening films by local filmmakers who want to be featured, Hyperreal functions similarly to Austin Media Arts in that local and regional film is celebrated to the same degree as films from major studios, smaller indie studios, and other international distributors.

This also recalls the idea of programming as an act of cultural bricolage discussed earlier in regard to Linklater's programming strategies with regional American films and other non-Hollywood and international films from independently working filmmakers. However, here it is done to a more drastic degree by working films from dominant

cultural institutions into this mix. The recontextualization of strictly mainstream films and cultural objects within a more authentically alternative, independent, and subcultural context recalls the use of similar objects by British punks in the 1970s. Dick Hebdige describes their stylistic practice:

> Safety pins were taken out of their domestic 'utility' context and worn as gruesome ornaments through the cheek, ear or lip. 'Cheap trashy fabrics (PVC, plastic lurex, etc.) in vulgar designs (e.g. mock leopard skin) and 'nasty' colours, long discarded by the quality end of the fashion industry as obsolete kitsch, were salvaged by the punks and turned into garments (fly boy drainpipes, 'common' mini skirts) which offered self-conscious commentaries on the notions of modernity and taste. (Hebdige 107)

What is most important here is the attention to notions of quality that are seen by some as inherent in these objects and how these notions and qualities are easily subverted by punks and other subcultural groups. Typical discourse around popular films, which in the mainstream are usually limited to how much money they make and how various actors/actresses perform, are subverted by being shown in this different alternative context. Like the plastic lurex and leopard skin clothes that punks wear with indifference to concepts of high fashion, this group of hipster moviegoers embrace tacky, overstimulating, and often uncomplicated cinema as an equal to its artful counterpart in order to "undermind every relevant discourse" of good taste in film and how film is to be consumed (Hebdige 108).

Hyperreal's programming, then, reflects a new form of cinephilia that differs from that which originated in film societies and clubs (of which Hyperreal undeniably draws its own name from) of both American and European origins. Where early film clubs appealed to cinephiles by showing "motion pictures of excellence" that wouldn't be shown at movie palaces and little theaters, Hyperreal is open to show any film, regardless of its high or low cultural status, simply for the sake of watching films (Wasson, *Museum Movies* 41). Thus, cinephilic consumption of film is no longer just for the purpose of using "cachet as pretension," as conceived by people such as Jean-Luc Godard or Henri Langlois. Rather, cinephilic viewing is deployed more purely for the sake of loving film, as the term denotes, while also sharing that love with other attendees without any kind of rigid standards of taste around the films themselves (Elsaesser 27).

RECONFIGURING PARTICIPATION

Part of the overarching DIY identity and philosophy of Hyperreal as envisioned by its founders was an inherent sense of participation from anyone who might be interested in doing so to almost any degree that they would like. As far as any of the founders were concerned, if someone had an idea they liked, whether it be for a single screening, or programming a series, an event, or any other kind of activity or idea, they'd do their best to make it happen in some form or another (McMichael). The two main avenues for people to directly participate in what Hyperreal offers come in both the ways that their screenings are chosen and run themselves, as well as the products and projects that they create in the form of community "video zines." Because of this openness to

community collaboration on multiple platforms, Hyperreal as an organization becomes a way for Austin's film community to move beyond typical roles as audience or amateur filmmakers to people that are more solidly ingrained in networks of exhibition, distribution, and discussion of film that stand firmly outside of any mainstream or large indie circuits.

Such participatory culture has been thought to be a key aspect of sub/countercultural movements in regard to their ability to build momentum and cultivate a community of individuals that share the same ideas and values. This oftentimes goes hand in hand with unique kinds of cultural expression of various kinds, from fashion choices to the creation of actual objects like songs, films, or publications. Dick Hebdige frames this cultural production within the context of a more semiotic sense, saying that subcultures "manifest culture in the broader sense, as systems of communication, forms of expression and representation" through their own unique forms of expression (129). In the creation of alternative and inclusive streams or networks of cultural production, sub/countercultural groups such as Hyperreal have been successful in creating communities in which more unique, original, and authentic expression and experiences are possible.

As discussed previously in more detail, Hyperreal works to make its screenings more inclusive of locally made films as an attempt to highlight work that is coming from within Austin's film community itself. However, this kind of participation at the level of the film screening also occurs in a more ideological sense in how Hyperreal's founders envision these events themselves. When not screening films as a part of any kind of

dedicated series or co-hosted event, Hyperreal's weekly screenings were shown under the label of "Family Movie Night" as a more general, catch-all term for their programming. Compared to other exhibition spaces that either have no designation for their general programming (in the case of multiplexes) or ones that still categorize films in a more generalized sense (AFS's "Signature Programming"), Hyperreal's designation of their screenings as such indicate an intentional move to put these screenings in a more intimate and communal context. By framing the filmgoing experience in this way, the audience is created and envisioned as a more cohesive body connected by something larger and more important than a simple curiosity in a film. On this matter, co-founder David McMichael says that when going to a movie at a typical theater, he feels that you understand that people are sitting around you in a dark room watching the same movie as you, yet it's still a very solitary experience in that the other people are meant to be ignored for the sake of properly viewing a film (McMichael). In contrast, "Family Movie Night" implies that you are meant to be present with everyone else at the screening enjoying things *together* and sharing in the experience as a whole.

This tendency to share also extends to the way that movies that are programmed themselves. More often than not, the films that are programmed as a part of Family Movie Night come from individuals within the audience/community itself. Historically, film programming has oftentimes been a position and task that is taken on by either a single individual or a select few within an organization or theater who act as a kind of "custodian of cinema culture" (Bosma 1). This kind of singular programmer, organizing screenings based on their own taste, what their theater is known for showing, or other

industrial trends (as is the case with many art houses), can be thought to work as a kind of tastemaker given that what is shown in a particular theater is determined solely by them. Instead of this approach, individual films that are shown as a part of Hyperreal's Family Movie Nights are more often than not chosen by people in the community themselves with the intention of sharing a movie they personally love. These individuals are usually highlighted on Hyperreal's Instagram account prior to the screening alongside an image from the (unnamed) film that they have chosen as a way to put a name and face to the film that is being shown (they would also typically introduce the film at the screening).

Not only does this approach to programming demystify the institutional character of the programmer, oftentimes an only slightly known person to the public, but as a whole it refocuses the curatorial power of the programmer and puts it into the hands of anyone who would like to show something that they personally find valuable. Because of this more democratically open approach to choosing what gets shown, and more importantly *why* they are shown, the films at these screenings can be seen as a more accurate reflection of the tastes and preferences of the people who actually attend them. This is not to say that programmers are uninvolved in the act of viewing the films that they show (actually seeing the movies he chooses with an audience is actually an important part of Lars Nilsen's approach to programming at AFS, for example), but Hyperreal's approach makes screenings an active place of sharing work that anyone might find important, or more importantly fun (Nilsen, Personal Interview).

Looking more closely at how Hyperreal promotes locally made work also shows their approach to supporting participation in filmmaking from anyone in the community

as well. Aside from more typical screenings of shorts or features made by community members, Hyperreal has also hosted calls for submissions for their series of video zines that are premiered at live events at local clubs and venues, usually accompanied with a party and live music after the screening (McMichael). Drawing on the idea of independently published magazines/newspapers that are extremely prevalent among DIY and punk communities, these video zines act as compilations of locally-produced work around a central theme that can come from anyone with any kinds of financial or technical means, whether it's someone with a $30,000 budget and state-of-the-art cameras or someone who shot and edited a film on their phone (McMichael). Not only does this encourage media production from individuals of any skill level or economic status, but it actively puts this work in front of people on a semi-regular basis.

In doing this, as well as categorizing these screenings as "zines," Hyperreal works within a tradition of media distribution that "[celebrates] the everyperson in a world of celebrity" and "[rejects] the corporate dream of an atomized population broken down into discrete and instrumental target markets" in order to "form networks and forge communities around diverse identities and interests" (Duncombe 7). While there are networks within Austin that promote and help fund local filmmaking, these often rely on works fitting a certain idea of what is acceptable to receive funding as decided by the organizations themselves. So, by hosting an open call for work from anyone as long as it's within a relatively broad theme without attention to technical prowess, Hyperreal more actively encourages the production and appreciation of local film work from anyone who wants to participate.

Both of these methods of working the audience and/or general public into the basic operation of film screenings shows the ways in which Hyperreal is able to fundamentally change the relationships and roles of individuals within the larger framework of film exhibition itself. In doing so, they are able to drastically change the ways in which film exhibition works as a site of communal tastemaking, and how film production works as a way for community members to directly consume and celebrate each other's work on a more regular basis in an alternative network. As a result, one might be able to think of Hyperreal as a more modular entity in the sense that different people are able to move between different roles in the whole experience of film viewing while still maintaining some sense of a desired goal or product.

CONCLUSION

Though it has only been in existence for five years, the most recent of which put a halt on all operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hyperreal Film Club has managed to make a noticeable and generally positive impact on the current state of film exhibition in Austin, as well as the ways people in the city can participate in that exhibition. In many ways, this new vision for film exhibition is something that is much needed within both a local and national cinematic context where "indie," as both a category for films as well as for institutions, has become as much of a branding strategy as a descriptor for larger, dominant media players looking to appeal to and profit off of more distinguished or niche demographics (Newman, "Indie Culture" 48).

Speaking on the relationship between those in power and those who are relatively new within the realm of the cultural field, Bourdieu notes that

> On one side are the dominant figures, who want continuity, identity, reproduction; on the other, the new-comers, who seek discontinuity, difference, revolution. To 'make one's name'... means making one's mark, achieving recognition (in both senses) of one's difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them; at the same time, it means creating a new position beyond the positions presently occupied, ahead of them, in the avant-garde. ("Production of Belief" 289)

While Hyperreal might not fit into a conception of the avant-garde (though they certainly aren't afraid to explore it on occasion), their work illustrates this relationship between themselves and AFS as the new-comer and dominant figure, respectively, of Austin's independent film scene. Hyperreal's ability to envision an entirely different mode of film exhibition that stands so distinctly from more official and institutionalized models serves as a strong example of the ways in which microcinemas more generally can offer more engaging and accessible experiences than their dominant counterparts. By embracing an open and discontinuous attitude, Hyperreal has managed to forge a new path for film appreciation with an identity that is more representative of *everyone* involved in the exhibition process.

When considering the ways in which Hyperreal functions within the larger framework of Austin's film scene, David McMichael was hesitant to say whether or not what Hyperreal aims to do is really concerned with that idea. This of course doesn't mean

that Hyperreal is in any way against any idea of fostering a local film community, rather he sees Hyperreal as doing something entirely different than what players like AFS or Alamo Drafthouse are doing (McMichael). By creating a more social environment around moviegoing, Hyperreal has managed to cultivate a community of film lovers that generally are more concerned with sharing the experience of filmgoing with others regardless of what they're coming together to see. While this doesn't mean the films themselves are secondary to the events as a whole, the fact that people are willing to attend regardless of what is being shown speaks to a desire to simply watch movies with friends. What's more so valued is that the people who attend these screenings share a similar, non-pretentious or precious, attitude towards cinema. Compared to the audiences of art houses who might tend to find value in pristine projection of a new restoration, Hyperreal's audiences are satisfied in seeing films in any way possible, even if it means that it's projected onto a pink wall (McMichael). Even if they have to change where or how they approach exhibition in the future, whether it be in a more typical theatrical space or a cramped and dingy basement, their audience will be sure to follow because the spirit will remain the same.

Chapter 5: The Shape of Indie Exhibition to Come

Something that should be said about this thesis is that it was conceived and written during a time in which AFS Cinema, Hyperreal Film Club, and most other independent film exhibitors have been closed due to the (still ongoing) COVID-19 pandemic. Not only that, but the sociopolitical landscape of the United States, from racial tension to economic turmoil, has changed the ways that people have thought about the media that they consume, among many other things, and how they relate to others more generally. Independent exhibitors across the country have had to find ways to continue to engage with their audiences and keep the spirit of their local filmgoing communities alive, despite not being able to safely gather as a collective. As someone whose pre-pandemic daily routine seemingly revolved around what films were showing at AFS, seeing the ways that both it and Hyperreal have attempted to provide screenings and other kinds of online programming and activities has been interesting, and perhaps even hopeful. Even now, when theater doors largely remain closed, the question about movie theaters that seems to be on a lot of people's minds, whether they're a cinephile or not, seems to be "What will moviegoing look like in a post-pandemic world?" Based on the events of the last year across the film exhibition industry and America more generally, the answer to this question as it relates to independent exhibitors seems to indicate a movement towards increased accessibility as well as a deeper appreciation for what these venues have to offer in regard to the films they show and how people come together for

them. Along with this, it has forced a reimagining of the ways in which people can come together around film *at all* given the inability to come together physically.

THE YEAR WITHOUT MOVIE THEATERS

Since March of 2020, industrial responses to the pandemic have largely been what one would expect given the seemingly precarious nature of theatrical exhibition in the wake of streaming's continually growing popularity and ubiquity, which had been happening long before this specific moment. Art houses and other independent exhibitors, which in a lot of ways have been dealing with this existential reality of their business since the 1980s with the rise of VHS and other at-home viewing technologies, have found themselves in a particularly tough spot given their more niche appeal, but in some ways seem more prepared to deal with this situation presently and in the future than their mainstream counterparts. The various ways in which large and small movie theaters and distributors have responded to theater closures and lack of public exhibition indicate how some of these players are more or less able to adapt to these changes with various degrees of success in order to simply survive.

Looking back at articles from the first month of the pandemic, panic and pessimism seemed to be the default perspectives that journalists and other industry members approached with when considering the future of film exhibition around the entire world. For many, the usual seasonal markers like summer blockbusters, the fall festival circuit, and the 2021 Academy Awards were all thrown into uncertainty at a point when no one was sure when anything would be able to return to a kind of normalcy, not

to mention when people would be able to fill theater seats, which seemed to be further down the line than other kinds of activities (Buchanan). Without these key seasons and events for the film industry to use as guides for both releasing key titles and generating crucial income for future success (for both production and exhibition), institutions of all sizes found themselves in a position where they needed to think differently about how they should approach film viewing in a more isolated and individualized home setting. Even early on, about a month into the pandemic, governors (including Texas' Greg Abbott) encouraged theaters to reopen, a suggestion that many theaters, including AFS Cinema quickly turned down simply because it seemed irresponsible and dangerous due to lack of resources and information around the virus (Whittaker, "Abbot Says"). Despite any desire to have any kind of normalcy return at such an early moment in the pandemic, all signs pointed towards needing to reconfigure the way that everyone would go to the movies.

As such, the release status of many titles, of both indie and mainstream films, that were slated for release in 2020 were also thrown into uncertainty, bringing into question whether or not films that were already completed would see any kind of release until theaters reopened. From the Brazilian "weird western" *Bacurau* (2019, dir. Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles) to *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020, dir. Patty Jenkins) and the long-anticipated *Tenet* (2020, dir. Christopher Nolan), it was clear that whenever these movies were to be released, they most likely would not be on the big screen (though *Tenet* managed to have a theatrical run in the UK and parts of the United States at the insistence of Nolan himself).

Because of this, studios and distributors were, in some senses, forced to change their release strategies and leave the typical windowed release model behind in favor of direct-to-streaming premieres, the first major instance of which being the release of *Trolls: World Tour* (2020, dir. Walt Dohrn), which caused controversy with AMC which threatened to cut ties with Universal Studios on any future theatrical releases should they insist on simultaneous home and theatrical releases in the future, as it seemed to indicate they would do (D'Alessandro). By the end of 2020, a handful of films slated for release that year came out in one form or another with just as many delayed indefinitely until theaters would finally reopen, including Wes Anderson's *The French Dispatch* (which will potentially premiere at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival as of writing this). So, while it seems that the industry has been able to adapt in some form to this new normal of film releases, the desire to reopen them and preserve that sacred viewing space for future audiences and films has remained strong for many.

Largely, the reopening of movie theaters relies on two main factors: the known scientific information around COVID-19 spread in spaces like theaters, and the psychological state of audiences and whether or not they would feel comfortable going to a theater at all when they can still stream new releases at home (Gleiberman). In the summer of 2020, it seemed that major exhibitors like AMC planned to reopen with some safety measures (inadequate ones, at that) as a way to try to minimize lost profit by showing major releases such as *Tenet*. Eventually, movie theaters would slowly start to reopen with limited capacities in areas where it could be more safely done, as well as creating new ways to generate revenue without properly opening to the public.

One of the main ways that movie theaters tried to make some money was by renting out theaters for private use with access to various amenities alongside the theatrical experience in a somewhat safer setting. This approach was adopted by large chains such as Cinemark, as well as smaller ones such as Alamo Drafthouse, both of which implemented theater rental in the summer of 2020. While this is a relatively reasonable way for theaters to make some money in this moment (see Figs 5.1 and 5.2), it doesn't really work as anything beyond that in regard to a communal filmgoing experience. As such, this seems to be primarily a way for theaters to prevent (or possibly delay) closures of individual locations and avoid layoffs instead of offering a moviegoing experience that more resembles that of a pre-COVID world. Also, by framing this kind of offering from theaters as a personal experience, the ability to see a movie in a theater with your friends largely seems like a more isolated and exclusive mode of filmgoing reserved

BENEFITS	PRIVATE WATCH PARTY *Plus taxes & fees. Prices vary by location & movie selection.	PREMIUM PRIVATE SCREENING		
		CLASSIC MOVIE PACKAGE LIMITED TIME OFFER!	NEW MOVIE RELEASE	NEW MOVIE ADVANCE RELEASE
Price Per Event	$99-$175*	Starting at $240	Starting at $250	Starting at $300
Guest Capacity	Up to 20	20 or more	50% auditorium capacity varies by location	
Movie Choices	Select new movies available + 8-15 classic movie options	150 options	Most new movies	Select new movies
Showtimes	Pre-selected dates & times	Your choice of date & times		
Concessions	Available at current concession stand prices	Includes popcorn + fountain drink combos	Discounted concession options	
Physical Distancing Environment				
Enhanced Cleaning & Safety				
Auditorium Access	15 minutes prior to showtime	30 minutes prior to showtime		
Movie Rewards Credits	Earn 1 point for every $1 spent	Up to 500 points per event		
Ability to Customize Event	—			
Dedicated Event Planner	—			
Onsite Event Coordinator	—			
Payment Options	Pay instantly via credit card	Pay instantly or up to 5 business days prior to event date via credit card, ACH or check		
Booking Lead Time	Book up to 1 week before your party	Book up to 4 months before your screening		
How to Book	Book instantly in the app or cinemark.com/private-watch-party	Request a quote by completing the form		

Fig 5.1 Cinemark's offerings for private theater rentals as of September 2020. Screenshot by author.

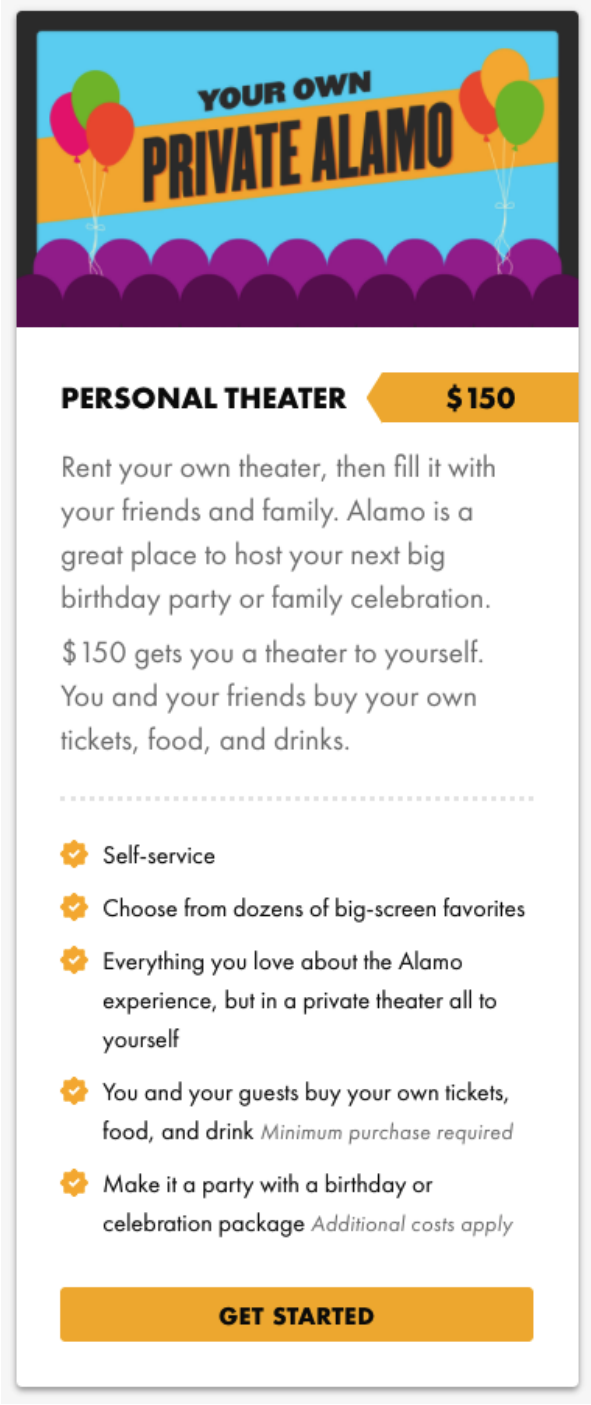

Fig 5.2 Alamo Drafthouse's offerings for private theater rentals as of March 2021. Screenshot by author.

for individuals with the money to do so, and not for anyone who can only afford a ticket. While larger chains such as Cinemark and Alamo Drafthouse likely aren't as invested in creating and maintaining a local film community through their screenings, their need and desire to stave off closures and the like are things that art houses and other smaller exhibitors have still had to worry about in this time. In the case of Alamo Drafthouse, which partially reopened relatively early during the summer of 2020 in Austin, these efforts have not prevented financial troubles, as they declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy in March of 2021 and will be closing several locations across the country, including the Ritz theater in downtown Austin (Sperling).

Even when reopening has been allowed by state governments, independent exhibitors have largely remained closed out of the basic desire to prevent the spread of COVID-19 because of their actions. As previously mentioned, Austin Film Society, as well as other major exhibitors in Austin such as Alamo Drafthouse and Violet Crown Cinema, initially turned down permission to reopen at early stages of the pandemic for this reason. As time has gone on, however, and more information has come out in regard to the spread of COVID-19, among other things, some independent theaters around the country have begun to reopen to varying degrees. As of August 21st, 2020, Alamo Drafthouse reopened their Slaughter Lane location in Austin with new safety precautions to be ready for new releases such as *Bill & Ted Face The Music* (2020, dir. Dean Parisot) and *Tenet*, among other recently released titles to "make up for lost time" (Alamo Victory). While this decision largely seems to not have resulted in increased spread of the virus within Austin and has led to the reopening of other Drafthouse locations within the

city, Austin Film Society and Hyperreal Film Club have remained closed indefinitely as conditions progress for better or worse. During this time, however, each group has made attempts to continue reaching out to their audiences and communities in safe, and often virtual ways, despite the inability to gather in person, to various degrees of success.

MAINTAINING THE COMMUNITY

Both Austin Film Society and Hyperreal Film Club have taken steps to try and recreate the experience of attending their screenings and events without the physical ability to do so, specifically working in ways that people can do so and still feel as if they are a part of a larger community of viewers. A majority of these efforts have obviously stayed online, as that is the safest way to go about any kind of social activity in these unprecedented times, but whether or not these efforts have been successful in keeping people together may be debatable. Despite any less-than-ideal circumstances around any kinds of virtual events, what has been offered within the last year seems to have filled at least part of the void left by the lack of physical gatherings around film screenings.

For AFS, its offerings have largely been dictated again by outside distributors, but there have also been opportunities for them to offer films from Texas filmmakers on a more consistent basis. Relatively quickly during the pandemic, Kino Lorber offered up their streaming catalog of films, including new releases such as *Bacurau*, to art houses across the country as a way to help generate some kind of revenue for theaters that partnered with them. For the most part, AFS relied on this catalog, as well as a few others on occasion, for their streaming service. It allowed them to screen films that they had

intended on doing so in person, such as *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019, dir. Diao Yinan) and *Vitalina Varela* (2019, dir. Pedro Costa), recent titles such as *Fantastic Fungi* (2019, dir. Louie Schwartzberg) that did exceptionally well at their box office pre-closure, and other films from local filmmakers such as *Call Her Ganda* (2018, dir. PJ Raval) and *Miss Juneteenth* (2020, dir. Channing Godfrey Peoples).

Eventually, to supplement these digital screenings as well as others via the Criterion Channel, AFS offered a discussion club to their members, which would meet semi-regularly and offer AFS members a chance to actually talk about specific films with others in the community over a group video call. Largely, this grew out of a desire for employees at AFS Cinema to be able to watch movies with their friends, and eventually expanded into a more official feature of AFS (Herrick). Although this has perhaps not been a wide-reaching program, with only a handful of individuals participating every month, folks at AFS still see it as a valuable tool for keeping people connected with a small, but relatively active and dedicated group of people who want to remain connected in such a way.

Similarly, Hyperreal Film Club started out the pandemic by hosting weekly virtual family movie nights in an attempt to continue their weekly film programing that they provided before their closure. This would primarily be done via the program Netflix Party, which is an extension for internet browsers that allows people with Netflix accounts to simultaneously watch a movie with a live chat on screen alongside the video feed. Unfortunately, because of mounting stress and the generally discouraging climate of the early pandemic, these screenings tapered off and were replaced with some specific

sets of programming later on down the line (McMichael). Later on, there would be other ways that Hyperreal managed to reach out to the community using podcasts and maintaining their online film criticism publication and social media presence.

Both of these methods speak to the general ideas and habits that both of these groups had around moviegoing at a time when they were able to host screenings in real, physical space. By providing online programming in partnership with international distributors and local filmmakers, AFS Cinema was able to maintain their usual networks of media flow and continue to deliver international cinema with an Austin flare, as the programmers would typically try to do (Nilsen). Along with their typical film offerings, the ways in which they are able to engage with the city's film community have largely remained the same by focusing primarily on their members as individuals who can participate in AFS-sanctioned activities around film viewing instead of the general public. While patrons are certainly able to view the films that AFS Cinema offers for at-home viewing, the fact that they remain focused on catering to paid members as privileged members of the community indicates an unchanged preference for those who can provide continued financial support to the organization. This of course isn't entirely reasonable at the moment, when lack of financial support can potentially be the difference between the life and death of a theater such as AFS Cinema. However, with other methods of engagement available, some of which are more accessible to broader audiences such as Netflix Party, it seems like a rather limiting choice in regard to keeping local filmgoing connections alive.

In the case of Hyperreal Film Club, despite the fact that its virtual family movie night was a relatively short-lived project, it clearly speaks to their commitment to using film as a medium to bring people together under even the most dire circumstances. As far as their other methods of remaining active in this time are concerned, they also work to preserve this kind of community-created discourse around film. By continually encouraging anyone to write about the films that they love, and even create theoretical programming sets, Hyperreal has managed to maintain some kind of community-created film culture that puts the process of creation and celebration of "good film" in the hands of the people. So, despite a lack of organized events for people to attend, there is still an implied sense of self-determination in what kinds of movies you want to watch and share with others on a platform that's available to as many people as possible.

Between these two groups' efforts to maintain the film communities that they respectively have built and/or appealed to over their years of operation, it's clear that each group is actively trying to maintain the kinds of audiences and connections that they had developed in real life. While this is clearly something that can be seen as being in the interest of revenue for an organization like AFS Cinema which will need these funds to remain in operation before they can begin to properly reopen, giving more attention to groups that have been historically underserved or underrepresented in art house communities is something that should be attempted more strongly, and continued into the future.

EXPANDING RESPONSIBILITIES

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, there was yet another instance in the United States in which a Black man, George Floyd, was needlessly murdered by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Floyd's death sparked a major, and long overdue, conversation about racial inequality and injustice in America that seemed to permeate far beyond the typical activist and social circles that these conversations often happen within, becoming a mainstream topic with protests happening across the country for weeks. Along with these direct actions, people were having more frequent conversations about police and prison abolition, showing increased interest in mutual aid groups, and beginning to think about what steps can be taken to begin a process of reparations, equality, and justice not only for Floyd, but for the Black community more broadly.

With the prevalence of these conversations, naturally the entertainment business, especially within the independent exhibition sector, had some of its own reckoning to do given its long history of racist representations of various ethnic minorities, unequal representation within production, and so on. For art houses and other independent exhibitors, specifically, this meant taking time in which normal operations have ceased in order to evaluate the ways in which they have contributed to such a sociopolitical climate and what steps they can take to try and remedy it. Unsurprisingly, the history of moviegoing for Black and other non-white audiences is one full of racist practices and prejudice. While not limited to art houses, movie theaters frequently attempted to segregate audiences in multiple ways, including building physical barriers between white and black audiences in auditoriums, segregating screenings by time (usually providing

very late showings for Black audiences), or segregating theaters by neighborhoods more generally, allowing Black Americans to only attend screenings at certain theaters that were often put on the bottom of distribution lists. Because of this final reason, films would often be shown months after their release for White audiences, which in turn resulted in low income and short lifespans for these theaters (Gomery 156-158). It wouldn't be until roughly 1965 that movie theaters were desegregated, but not without further difficulties in regard to their experience at theaters themselves (Gomery 155).

As has been touched on earlier, art houses and their predecessors have historically attempted to appeal to distinct audiences that were interested in experiencing an exclusive, upscale, and distinguished filmgoing experience. Compared to ethnic theaters of the time, art houses sought to cater to high class audiences, which were nearly always whites with more disposable income, with more distinguished taste and ideals as to what constituted "good cinema" (Wilinsky 57, 83). Although the typical art house audience has certainly diversified since the mid-20th century, it became increasingly clear in the present moment that racial, economic, and other social factors have continued to exclude certain groups from these imagined audiences. Although AFS Cinema doesn't keep track of audience demographics aside from occasional samples at specific showings, it was clear that they had work to do in order to address internal and external operations in order to address their role within the art house industry and racial inequity. Similarly, Hyperreal Film Club saw the moment as an opportunity to address their own biases and function in order to achieve similar goals. Despite similar goals, AFS Cinema and

Hyperreal took slightly different approaches to addressing this issue, focusing in part on their programming, as well as their internal structuring.

In early June of 2020, at what seemed to be the peak of protests and general public awareness of the issue, AFS Cinema and Hyperreal both released statements on their Instagram pages as initial recognition of these events and what their plans going forward might look like, and what that means for their respective institutions and communities of film lovers (see Figs. 5.3 and 5.4). Looking at these two responses,

Fig. 5.3 Austin Film Society's statement on Instagram regarding racial inequality and justice in the wake of George Floyd's death. Screenshot by author, names and photos of other users redacted.

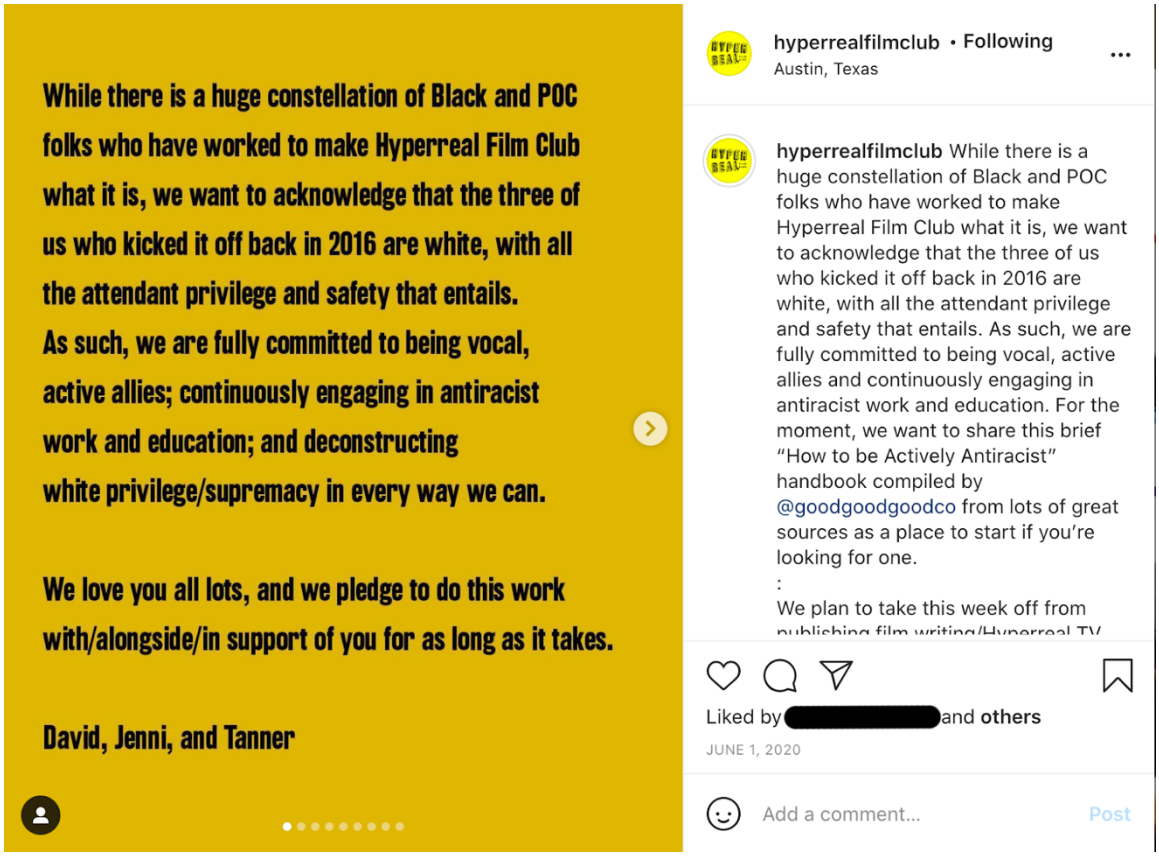

Fig. 5.4 Hyperreal Film Club's statement on Instagram regarding racial inequality and justice in the wake of George Floyd's death. Screenshot by author, names of other users redacted.

there's a stark difference between what the two organizations acknowledge and what they say they are going to do moving forward (at least in a preliminary and brief way) that speak to the difference between art house cinemas and microcinemas' positions in their respective communities.

While AFS voices clear support for this cause, it gives less specific wording in regard to their role in creating and in maintaining traditional hierarchies within the art house industry. Rather, they simply say that they will listen, learn, and act. While this is

good, it is a vague statement. Hyperreal, on the other hand, takes an active stance in acknowledging the racial makeup of the founders, as well as the ways in which their recognition and success have rested on the volunteer work and contributions of people of color that they have been provided with. While its plans for what it wants to do is about as explicit as AFS's statement, Hyperreal takes a more direct stance in regard to committing to dismantling systems of white privilege and supremacy, as well as providing further information within its post (not pictured here) about how to be anti-racist. Along with that, Hyperreal took a brief break from any kind of action, including promotion or virtual events, in order to leave space on platforms such as Instagram for information surrounding protests and other more immediate and useful information to have more of a presence (McMichael). Between these two responses, it's important to note the difference between the general support for this cause provided by AFS Cinema and the more active response that Hyperreal Film Club took by providing direct access to resources and tools to make direct change.

After these posts were made, there were noticeable changes and actions that both groups made, however, in regard to both their highlighted programming as well as the ways in which the organizations approach their general functions presently and in the future in order to further act on these sentiments of supporting marginalized groups. In the case of AFS, it released a statement on their website under a new "Racial Equity & AFS" page stating that

> Racial equity is a priority for AFS. AFS joins the City of Austin in recognizing that race is the key indicator of quality-of-life outcomes in our city. As such, our

> primary goals with equity are focused on racial equality and inclusion across the organization, and we are committed to anti-racist work and transparency. In the fall of 2020 AFS underwent an equity audit to assess all programs, practices, and policies regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are now creating a strategic plan that is informed by the recommendations and questions for exploration in the audit report. In the spirit of transparency and community partnership, once this process is complete, we look forward to sharing our plans. The equity audit is a first important step of many in the development of a long-term institutional plan in which DEI informs all decision-making at AFS. ("Racial Equity & AFS")

As of this writing, AFS has not released its equity plan with details of what exactly it plans to do after undergoing this process. However, acknowledging the reality of racial disparity and inequality in Austin specifically, as well as committing to anti-racist work, is an important thing to at least begin doing at a time when theater operations don't take up as much time as they would in normal circumstances. Similarly, AFS Cinema began to highlight work from Black filmmakers on both its Instagram account, as well as in its virtual cinema offerings with titles such as the locally-produced and AFS-funded film *Miss Juneteenth.*

Hyperreal, after similarly committing to anti-racist work within their organization made some strong moves in their programming and approach to virtual screenings that continue its direct involvement of community members in their operations. Since June 2020, it has hosted three programs of films from guest programmers in the Austin film community: "Black is Not A Genre," a series offering new perspectives on Black genre

cinema, “The Feminine Hashriq,” a series exploring cinema made by women in the Arab world, and “Cinema Latinxperience,” a series highlighting 21st century Latin American cinema (“Virtual Programming”). Not only do these programming sets decenter Hyperreal’s founders in this conversation, but also offers people from the communities represented in these series to direct the narrative and conversation around these films on platforms such as podcasts and other virtual discussions with other individuals.

Generally speaking, these are both approaches to addressing racial inequality within art house and indie exhibition spaces at the level of the institutions themselves, their programming, as well as the audiences that go to the movies. While a space such as Hyperreal might be more able to make drastic changes to its structure more quickly given their more loose organizational structure and personal philosophy to how it wants the group to work, AFS’s approach is likely the best that can be done with a more traditionally structured organization that probably can’t make changes like Hyperreal’s without other more complex considerations in regard to payment, securing rights, and other structural factors. In each case, these are steps that are much needed as organizations look towards the future when people can safely gather for movies.

WHAT’S NEXT?

As changes such as these are made, the ways in which organizations such as art house theaters and microcinemas understand how they shape who does and does not participate in local film cultures at different levels of involvement. This is especially important to consider in a city such as Austin that has undergone a huge shift in terms of

the city's size, social and economic capital inside and outside of America's film industry, and demographic makeup. All of these factors have a direct influence on the audiences that local organizations such as AFS Cinema and Hyperreal Film Club create, and serve as strong indicators of who has a say in the shaping of the city's local film culture.

As AFS has become a more dominant player within Austin's film and media industry and community, particularly given its early status as an alternative and grassroots film exhibitor, the ways in which independence is framed against their influence and size tend to be used as ways to appeal to both powerful and affluent individuals as well as general audiences that lean toward those higher social and economic classes. As said before, this is not meant to be an entirely negative assessment of AFS's institutional identity and practices, but rather an acknowledgement of the ways in which its position as an alternative to mainstream film institutions has morphed over time to reflect more historical trends within the art house theater industry. While smaller in size and lacking the greater influence of national exhibitors, within its locality it stands as a dominant force in determining what people watch and how that develops a sense of Austin's film taste.

Almost naturally, as once small groups obtain such influence within a community, new and independent players are inevitably going to rise up as more autonomous alternatives to larger institutions. Compared to these larger players, microcinemas such as Hyperreal Film Club offer a more democratic and participatory experience for everyone involved in the exhibition process in shaping both the content that is shown, as well as how it is shown in the first place. Because of this open approach to film exhibition, I

personally believe that it is groups such as these that can have a more meaningful impact on local filmgoing communities. Their propensity to show anything they see fit, regardless of any notions of quality, taste, genre, cultural impact, or prestige, allows them to create film communities that reflect a more inclusive and diverse sense of those characteristics. On top of this, these values oftentimes reflect the interests of local audiences more closely not only based on the titles that are shown, but the general approach and philosophy behind the events themselves that are based on more accessible and DIY sentiments.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other sociopolitical events and landmarks such as the protests in the summer of 2020, has only magnified the ways in which media and the people who make it and the places that distribute and exhibit it influences the lives of the people that come into contact with it. Making both art houses and other smaller film exhibitors more reflective of the people, ideas, and realities of the communities that they exist in is something that should, and likely will, take precedence when they are able to continue functioning in the ways that they did (or at least as close to that as possible) when they are able to operate in person once again. By facilitating online events and continuing communication between individuals, both AFS Cinema and Hyperreal Film Club have demonstrated that such connections are a key factor in both of their functions. When people are once again able to come together in person to enjoy films of any kind, it will hopefully be the beginning of a shift within independent film exhibition to serve and include audiences that have typically been marginalized, yet still important to these institutions.

In terms of future scholarship on this topic, there is certainly more to be said about microcinemas more specifically in the various contexts and cities in which they operate. Although there is certainly a considerable amount of research on the topic in the form of journal articles and other Master's theses, all with interesting and rich explorations of different spaces and habits, taking a closer look at these groups and how they might further disrupt notions of independent media on national and international levels is but one way to further this discussion. Specifically, a great deal of scholarship on the topic appears to be particularly American and European-focused given the origins of these models of exhibition in both spaces, particularly in French cinematheques. Taking a closer look at exhibition spaces that operate outside of dominant international flows of media in Southern and Eastern contexts, for example, would be a particularly interesting and fruitful expansion in this sub-field of exhibition studies.

Unfortunately, at the present moment there are still a lot of unknowns in regard to when AFS Cinema and Hyperreal Film Club will be able to resume their screenings as they did pre-pandemic. As of now, the focus at AFS seems to be asking who feels welcome and who does not at the cinema, and accommodating groups that fall into that latter category while they try to return to showing films that are similar and reflective of a time before the pandemic (Herrick). There seems to be little doubt around whether or not people will actually return to the cinema itself, as it's clear that people are extremely eager to get back out in the public again once it is safe, and it's understood that AFS has a dedicated fanbase that can be counted on to fill their seats when they're able (Nilsen). The future at Hyperreal, on the other hand, seems to be somewhat more uncertain as

priorities have shifted during the pandemic as well as the roles and responsibilities of those more formally involved in the group (McMichael). Although this uncertainty is probably not an ideal position to be in for a group like Hyperreal, this temporary nature seems to be in line with the way that microcinemas have worked up to this point. The good part of that is that inevitably, there will likely be some other group with similar ideals that begins a similar mission of bringing people from their community around for a night at the movies, even if it's in someone's backyard.

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